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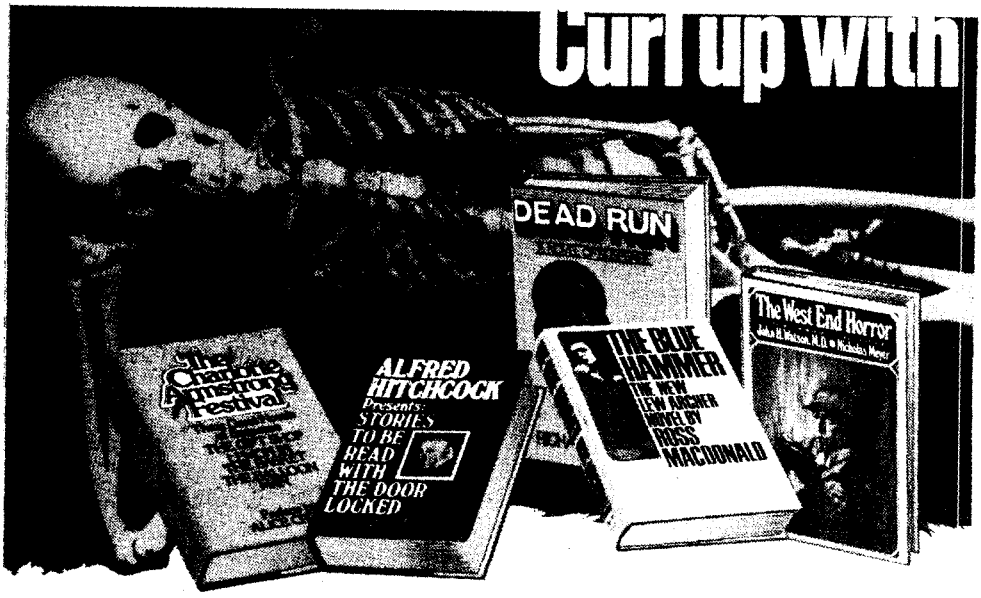

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a NEW Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

Pull up a chair, unfold your napkin, and join the Black Widowers at one of their monthly dinner meetings, complete with preprandial argument (this time between artist Mario Gonzalo and writer Emmanuel Rubin) and postprandial puzzle, this time a brilliant baffler that once again is unraveled by old reliable Henry the waiter (long may he wait!). As to the problem brought by the guest of the evening, it is the kind of problem that might have been conceived by a scientist and a fiction writer collaborating—or, more precisely, by a mathematician and a detective-story writer working together . . .

A CASE OF INCOME TAX FRAUD

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Mario Gonzalo, the artist-member of the Black Widowers, seemed oddly disheveled as he said vehemently, "I *cannot* teach what I do because I don't *know* what I do, but that doesn't mean I can't *do* it."

And Emmanuel Rubin, his straggly beard seeming to shoot sparks out of each gray bristle, raised his eyes, magnified through their thick lenses, and said, "If you don't know what you're doing, you're a paint-dauber and not an artist."

"You're a madman, Mannie. If knowing were everything, Michelangelo could teach you to be Michelangelo, but the fact is that Michelangelo couldn't teach anyone to be Michelangelo. For that matter, no one could have taught Michelangelo to be Michelangelo either. He was *born* Michelangelo."

"You miss the entire point. Teaching doesn't necessarily imply

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the making of an equal. Michelangelo could give the kind of instruction from which others might profit. If he couldn't create equals, he could create more skillful marble-tappers. You bet he knew what he was doing even if he could only pound a limited amount into the heads of mere mortals."

"Ah," said Gonzalo gleefully. "Mere mortals! And what made them mere mortals? The lack of genius. And what were the components of that genius? Did Michelangelo himself know?"

Thomas Trumbull, the code expert, staring over his Scotch and soda and apparently irritated at being excluded from a conversation which the loud voices of Gonzalo and Rubin had made into a private dialogue, scowled and said, "Since Michelangelo is dead and can't be consulted on the subject, why don't you drop this foolish argument?"

"No," said Gonzalo passionately. "I appeal from the sublime to the ridiculous and ask Manny. You're a writer, Manny—after a fashion. Can you teach what you do?"

"I not only can," said Rubin, "I have. I've written articles for *The Writer* and I've lectured at writers' conferences."

"And you've told them about query letters, and the necessity of rewriting, I suppose. Do you tell them how you know where you start your story, just which incident you put after which, how you break up your dialogue, how you make the denouement inevitable without telegraphing it?"

"I can do that."

"Then do it right now. Explain it to me!"

Roger Halsted, a teacher of mathematics, flushing to the roots of his receding hairline, said in his soft voice, "Don't do it, Manny. We'll be sitting here all night and none of us is interested. Not even Mario."

"I won't—but I can."

"You *can't,*" said Gonzalo, "because you can't describe the intuition involved. Enough intuition is talent, and a hell of a lot of it is genius, and intuition can't be taught."

Geoffrey Avalon, the patent attorney, said in his solemn baritone, "You stand with the Greeks, Mario. They were quite certain that any outstanding ability was the result of divine inspiration, the working of a god who possessed the person. The word 'enthusiasm,' expressing this process, means 'the god within' in Greek. Naturally, one can't explain the workings of a god to a mere mortal and that, I take it, is your position, Mario."

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"Bull!" said Rubin. "Bull to you, Jeff, and to Mario. There is nothing at all mysterious about intuition."

"If you understand it," said Mario, "explain it."

"I will," said Rubin. "All a man knows is what he observes and learns. There is nothing innate except a few biological instincts—certainly nothing cultural. It may be that with experience—with *experience,* Mario—a person learns to interpret what he observes, or to draw inferences, or to do something based on deduction or induction from those observations and past experiences. He does it so rapidly that he generally doesn't bother to isolate the steps in the procedure or even to be aware they exist, so he calls it intuition. —Yes, Henry?"

Henry, the perennial waiter at the Black Widowers' monthly dinner meetings, his bland and uncreased sixtyish face displaying no emotion, said gently, "Dinner is served, Mr. Rubin. If you will sit down, I am sure the rest will follow."

Rubin said, "I suppose I *am* the natural leader."

"No," said James Drake, the organic chemist, stubbing out his cigarette, "as host tonight, I'm the leader. However, the rest of us are naturally afraid you'll eat everything in sight if we don't all sit down to protect our rights."

"That depends," said Rubin, "on what we are having tonight. Henry?"

Henry said, "The chef is in an Old English mood, so it will be rib roast and Yorkshire pudding, preceded by a seafood quiche."

"*That's* not Old English," said Rubin.

"The chef is rarely consistent," said Henry, "and I'm afraid his judgment of what will constitute a success for dinner is largely intuitive."

"And largely right too," said Gonzalo, approving. "Whatever you say intuition is, Manny, some people have more of it than others, and why is that?"

"Some people have more talent than—"

"*Aha!*" said Gonzalo.

Rubin looked haughty and said with stiff politeness, "*If* I am to be allowed to finish my sentence, I will go on to explain that talent is the capacity for fast thought plus, perhaps, muscular deftness, and undoubtedly depends on the physiology of the brain and on nothing more mysterious than that."

"That's mysterious enough," said Drake.

"Mysterious now, but not necessarily forever," said Rubin, "and

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when we learn enough about the brain, talent and genius will be as non-mysterious as eye color."

"That's just your intuitive guess," shot back Gonzalo.

Rubin's reply was lost in quiche and the dinner conversation grew more general.

Throughout the argument the guest of the evening had maintained a steady and clearly amused silence. Quietly he listened and as quietly he sipped his martini.

His name was Simon Alexander. His black hair and black mustache, each thick and luxuriant enough to give him a Satanic appearance, or, failing that, a Levantine one, were his most prominent features. The small and persistent smile on his face seemed to accentuate the Satanism.

When the coffee was served, however, and Drake tapped his spoon against the water glass, Alexander, as though in anticipation, grew serious.

Drake said, "Gentlemen, it is time to grill our esteemed guest, and Manny, since you've been clattering away more insupportably even than usual, suppose you supervise the grilling."

Rubin said, "I'm sorry you find mental stimulation insupportable, Jim, but I'm not surprised." He took a quick sip of his coffee, signaled Henry for a bit of a freshener, then said, "Well, Mr. Alexander, or, if you prefer, Simon, how do you justify your existence?"

Alexander's smile returned. "By seeing to it that the American people pay their legal income taxes in full and on time."

There was a stir about the table and even Henry was betrayed into pausing in the precise performance of his duties long enough to cast a penetrating glance at the guest.

Trumbull said, with a distinct suggestion of outrage, "Are you in the employ of the Internal Revenue Service?"

"I am," said Alexander. "I'm in the division of fraud."

"Good God," said Trumbull, "and you offer that as justification for your existence? Horse-whipping with barbed wire is what it justifies." He cast a lowering glance at Drake.

Drake said, "Give him a chance, Tom. It takes all kinds to make a world and, aside from his profession, Simon is one of Nature's noblemen."

Alexander waved his hand. "It's all right, Jim. Tax collectors have always been the favorite villains of humanity from the moment they first appeared in ancient Sumeria five thousand years

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ago and invented writing in order to keep score. Besides, I think Mr. Trumbull was merely expressing himself colorfully and didn't really mean it."

"The hell I didn't," muttered Trumbull.

Rubin, who had held his peace in a markedly aggrieved manner, now raised his voice. "Since I'm grilling today, may I continue? Do you mind keeping quiet, Tom?"

Trumbull said, "Circumstances moved me."

Rubin waited for silence, then said, "Mr. Alexander—I withdraw the Simon, since through the common law of humanity you can have no friends here, or possibly anywhere—how can your role in tax collection be taken as justifying your existence?"

Alexander said, "I think it is not difficult to see that the I.R.S. represents the single essential arm of the government. Presidents can die and be replaced at once. Congress can bumble, the Supreme Court can drag, and we can lose ground diplomatically, economically, even militarily, yet perhaps make it all up afterward.

"However, let the tax structure of the nation falter and the government can no longer function. That would mean a spreading paralysis far wider, longer, and deeper than anything that can possibly occur short of a thermonuclear war."

Rubin said, "But the tax structure is not likely to falter, is it?"

"Not in the sense that the physical machinery is likely to break apart or that the computers will stop working. No, the weak link is the taxpayer himself. The American budget now approaches one-third of a trillion dollars annually and the largest part of this is collected out of the unwilling wallets of Americans everywhere."

"Sorry, Manny," said Trumbull angrily, "but I've got to interrupt. What the hell has 'unwilling' got to do with it? You enforce your own interpretation of the rules, act as prosecuting attorney and judge, hound us relentlessly, treat us as guilty till we prove ourselves innocent, and are perfectly ready to jail us if you can. What do you care if we're unwilling?"

"In the first place," said Alexander, "our judgments can be appealed to the courts. We are not the last word. Secondly, it would be much more harmful if we were not relentless. Despite everything we do, we cannot audit everyone, we cannot check into everything. If we tried, the cost would far outweigh what additional money we could collect. No, we are forced to depend on the aver-

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age American filling out a reasonably honest return and we can count on this only so long as that average American is convinced of the essential honesty of the system. Within the bounds of the law—and the law is not completely equitable, but that's not our fault—we must show neither favor nor mercy or the structure will break down.

"Thus, although Al Capone could commit theft on a grand scale and could even murder with impunity, he could be caught and punished on income-tax evasion. There is nothing ironical in this. Income-tax evasion is the greater crime. Similarly, nothing that Nixon and Agnew did prior to their forced resignations was as mischievous as their tampering with the I.R.S. and their making out of dubious income-tax returns. That they were willing to shake the faith of the American people in the honesty of the tax structure was of all their misdeeds the most unforgivable."

Rubin said, "You're serious about this now? You're not pulling our legs?"

"Dead-serious."

"Good God, Jim," Rubin said, "we ought to ask for your resignation. You've brought in a guy who's going to make it difficult for me to indulge in a little bit of honest expense-padding next time round."

Avalon cleared his throat. "I don't consciously pad, but I must admit that the I.R.S. and I might not agree on just what constitutes a deductible expense."

"Then you deduct it till we tell you otherwise," said Alexander agreeably. "That's the tax-man's version of keeping you innocent till proved guilty—but none of this is what I came here prepared to talk about."

"Oh," said Rubin, "what are you prepared for?"

"Jim told me," said Alexander, "that the Black Widowers like to hear some tale that involves a bit of a puzzle and I happen to have one."

"Jim was wrong to tell you that," said Avalon austerely. "We meet for the purpose of participating in stimulating conversation and a puzzle is not necessary. However—"

Alexander smiled. "In that connection, I was amused by the preprandial quarrel over the nature of intuition, since it is with a matter of intuition that my story is concerned."

"Telepathy!" said Gonzalo at once.

"No, I think not," said Alexander. "Actually, the whole conver-

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sation illustrated Mr. Rubin's thesis. I agree with him that intuition is undetected observation and deduction, and I would like to point out that what is often considered telepathy is the same. Thus, when Jim introduced me, he said—and I think these are his exact words—'This is Simon Alexander, an investigator of sorts and a very good one. I think he can sense criminality by some kind of inner magic.' Isn't that what you said, Jim?"

"I think so," said Drake.

"I notice you said 'an investigator of sorts,' " growled Trumbull. "Jim didn't say you were from the I.R.S."

Alexander said, "I am trying to make the point that the introduction took place when the drinks were being passed around—as the brandy is now, I see. —Henry, do we have any Curacao?"

"I believe so, sir."

"I'll have some then. With everyone concentrating on alcohol, I don't think anyone heard the introduction. Does anyone recall having heard it?"

There were no bites on that one, and Alexander smoothed his mustache with one forefinger and accepted the small glass with its orange-colored content from Henry.

"But if Rubin and Gonzalo did not *consciously* hear it," he said, "they nevertheless heard it, I'm convinced, and that bit about sensing criminality by some kind of inner magic is what sparked the argument on intuition. Of course, I *don't* use some kind of inner magic. I use reason and I am always quite conscious of the details of the reasoning. Except once—" He looked thoughtful.

Drake lit a cigarette from the dying stub of his old one and said, "Tell us, Simon."

"I intend to," said Alexander, "but it has a certain personal confidentiality about it. I have been given to understand that everything that goes on here is confidential."

"Everything," said Trumbull pointedly, "and that includes everything *we* say. We take it for granted that nothing *you* hear can be used against us as far as our taxes are concerned."

"Agreed," said Alexander, "but please be careful what you say, as I would rather not be asked to place too great a load on my integrity."

He sipped his Curacao, looked pensive, and, for some reason, particularly Satanic.

"You know, of course," he said, "that computers are now the life-blood of the I.R.S. We couldn't operate without them. Because

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they never hesitate, never tire, never grow bored, they are our great strength. Because they never think, they are our great weakness.

"To exploit a computer, however, and take advantage of its weakness, one must know every detail of a computer's working, and this eliminates almost all the human race. And it puts us off our guard.

"Some years ago the I.R.S. was royally diddled by someone who knew his computers, by a mathematician who was tired of the type of remuneration that mathematicians receive."

Halsted, who taught mathematics at a junior high school, sighed and said, "I know the type."

"The specific details of his operation don't concern you, but he managed to get a job that would involve the servicing of certain of our computers. For the purpose, he built himself a new statistical background, a new name, a new appearance, all the way down to a new social security number. How he managed that I won't tell you since, confidentiality or not, there is no point in spreading knowledge of the techniques of successful knavery."

"I agree," said Avalon, nodding.

"Nor," said Alexander, "will I tell you exactly how he managed to reprogram one key computer—for, the truth is, I don't understand it myself. I am no scientist or mathematician. Still, it was done. For a period of five years our mathematician—let us call him Jarvis—received large tax refunds while paying no taxes. He received more money in that interval than he could have earned in a lifetime of honest endeavor.

"He might still be receiving the money but for the accidental uncovering of an inconsistency in the program. The detection was the result of a most unusual coincidence, and I assure you the I.R.S. could not have been more dismayed, or embarrassed, at the event. Naturally, two things were at once essential. The money leak must be stopped and the computer programs so modified as to make the Jarvis type of fraud impossible in the future. That was carried through at once in the greatest secrecy. The secrecy was needed not so much to keep individual officials from looking ridiculous, though that was a factor, but to keep the Service itself from losing the confidence of the American people."

"They shall never learn the truth from any of us," said Gonzalo, with suspiciously intense gravity.

"The second thing," Alexander went on, "was to catch Jarvis,

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make him return what money was left, and clap him in jail for as long as the law would allow. It was the Al Capone reasoning, you see. Jarvis might get away with murder without shaking the foundation of American civilization, but he could not be allowed to get away with income-tax fraud. —And that was where I came in. I was put in charge of the case.

"My reputation in the Service is, perhaps, an exaggerated one. More than one person there suspects, as Jim told you, that I solve my cases with some inner magic, with some mysterious intuitive faculty that defies analysis. It has been said among us, for instance, that I can look at a tax return that seems somehow absolutely clean and yet tell that somehow money was clinging to the taxpayer's fingers. Or that I could interview a person and know for certain that there was a thief hidden inside the saint.

"Actually, there is no magic in it at all. I have a certain cleverness at observation and reasoning and a great deal of experience. My memory is excellent and I have encountered all varieties of behavior patterns—and all the ways of laundering returns too. What seems like magic or intuition boils down to noting small things that others don't and attaching the proper importance to them.

"It works the other way around too. I can often detect the saint inside the thief. I am quite certain, for instance, that you, Mr. Trumbull, are not short on your returns by even as much as fifty dollars. I suspect that you are ashamed of your relative honesty, and take it out by vilifying the office you dare not defraud. —And that's not a guess. I've met others like you."

It was hard for Trumbull to flush through his tan, but his expression made the flush unnecessary.

Avalon said, "I'm afraid your reputation is ruined, Tom. —Please go on, Mr. Alexander."

"To put it in figures, in nearly a quarter of a century at my job, I have almost never pointed a finger in the direction of either guilt or innocence and been proved entirely wrong."

"A quarter of a century?" said Avalon. "How old are you, Mr. Alexander?"

"Fifty-two."

"You don't look it," and Avalon's finger went unconsciously to his own mustache.

Alexander said, "There's gray in my hair, too, but I touch it up a little. Not so much out of vanity, you understand, as because

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the darkness seems to give me a forbidding appearance that is useful to me in my line of work. However—

"Jarvis was not an easy quarry. He could tell, somehow, that the game was up, and when the next refund came to him—this time under the eyes of the Service—it remained uncashed. It's not impossible he had an ally within the Service, but never mind that. Tracing him wasn't easy. He had quit his job long before and all records we had concerning him were false, down to his social security number, which, we suddenly discovered, was attached to no human being.

"I was forced to follow the most evanescent clues and to build up the picture of the human being who had done the deed. We left absolutely nothing unturned that might lead us to the identity of the thief and we finally had several possibilities, all dim and uncertain. Different operatives were assigned to each lead. The task was somehow to locate enough evidence to warrant a concentration of forces, a full-scale investigation of one particular man—and an arrest, if possible.

"My own target was a rather mousey man of average weight and height and of undistinguished appearance. That, in itself, was a good sign, because the fraud had to be carried out by someone who could be unnoticeable at crucial moments. He had a vague background that could not easily be traced without tipping our hand too soon—again an encouraging circumstance. At crucial periods he seemed to be particularly untraceable.

"Unfortunately, all this was negative and such things could never be made to stick. We needed some *positive* linkings. We had to locate him at the site of action each time, prove computer expertise, and so on. For that kind of evidence I haunted him like the ghost of a vulture. In fact, I managed to collect a circle of acquaintances in common with him, and I managed to be present at social gatherings along with him.

"Then, at one gathering in early November—he quiet and watchful, nursing a single drink for an hour, and I almost as quiet, certainly as watchful, and equally abstemious—the host spoke of Halloween. He had a seven-year-old daughter who had gone out trick-or-treating, along with several older friends, and who had come back in ecstasy.

"That rang true to me for I remembered very well my own daughter's first experience of the sort and I said, 'Yes, I have always thought that, were it not for the enormous commercial

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overweighting of the Yuletide, a child's spontaneous reaction would be to treat Halloween with the full excitement of Christmas.'

"And, surprisingly, my quarry spoke up. As though overwhelmed by an emotion that forced his naturally quiet personality into the limelight, he said, with a warm smile that lightened and almost transfigured his face, 'You are quite right. In a way, Halloween may be considered precisely equal to Christmas.' Those were his exact words, gentlemen, for I noted them at the time with particular care."

Rubin asked, "Why?"

"Because, as a result of that comment, I instantly and completely eliminated him as a suspect. So certain was I, that I remember having the distinct impulse to clap him on the shoulder and invite him out for a drink to celebrate his innocence. I couldn't though, for I suppose his own unexpected warmth had embarrassed him. As soon as he made the remark, he looked frightened and melted away. My own attention was distracted for a moment, and when I turned to find him, he was gone."

Alexander paused and finished the last of his Curacao. He said, "At the time, my sudden conviction of innocence might have seemed pure intuition—even to myself—but it wasn't. I cling to Rubin's hypothesis that intuition is undetected reasoning. Here is the reasoning as I figured it out later.

"Working laboriously from the tiniest beginnings, we had drawn a picture of our criminal, this Jarvis. He was a mathematician and had no family. The chances were that he was not only unmarried and childless, but that he had no siblings and that his parents may have died while he was young. He was cold, utterly cold—and I don't mean that he was ruthless and sadistic—merely that he lacked any desire or occasion for love and affection. Let me put it in a way that has great significance for me. He was not what I call 'a family man.' "

Halsted pleated the tablecloth absently and said, "You, I take it, *are* a family man."

"Completely. My parents, two brothers, and a sister are all close. I married a childhood sweetheart, have three children, and a grandson newly born, plus nieces and nephews. I know the emotions of a family man and no one, *no one,* could have spoken with such genuine warmth of children's holidays unless he had experienced the kind of love and affection that accompany those days.

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My quarry spoke that way; Jarvis could not have; conclusion, my quarry was not Jarvis and was innocent. What seemed like intuition was, after all, a process of reasoning.

"Intuition or reason, I reported my belief in his innocence to my superiors and the tracking down of the remaining possibilities grew correspondingly more intense. Five months later we caught the criminal and he is now in prison and likely to remain there a long time. Some of the money has been recovered; not all, of course."

He paused and Avalon broke the short silence that followed, saying, "I am delighted to have a happy ending for the department, but you spoke of a puzzle and I see none."

Simon Alexander sighed. "The happy ending is a qualified one. Having dismissed my suspect, we nevertheless found the other suspects fading as well. One after another they proved to be incompatible with the conditions of the fraud. One day, out of nothing but desperation, I returned to my own dismissed suspect and something unexpected arose that cast a new light on the affair. Astounded, I followed it up and had him—my own suspect whose innocence I had previously maintained and, virtually, guaranteed. He was the criminal after all.

"What puzzles me and, even now, keeps me awake occasionally, is the incongruity of it. He did indeed turn out to be what we had suspected all along—a man without family, love, or affection. Yet his remark about Christmas and Halloween, and the tone in which it was uttered, indicated precisely the reverse. How is this contradiction possible and how could he have used it to throw me off the scent?"

There was a silence around the table as Alexander waited for an answer.

Avalon finally spoke, staring at his empty brandy glass. "Mr. Alexander, despite easy theorizing, the fact remains that human beings are complicated and inconsistent creatures. There are undoubtedly contradictory aspects in the character of your suspect or of any man. You'll have to chalk it up to a bad break."

"I'd like to," said Alexander, "and I've tried to do so, but it is my experience that in fundamentals human beings are *not* inconsistent. A man who always puts on his left shoe first, may switch party allegiance and swap wives, but he will always put on his left shoe first."

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"Nothing will stop him from putting on his right shoe first, however uncomfortable that might be," said Halsted, "if it is necessary to do so to fool someone. He stepped purposely out of character to mislead you."

Alexander didn't answer at once. Then he said, "I doubt that. Even if he knew I was at his heels, and that's conceivable, he couldn't possibly have known me so well as to be sure that one short, apparently irrelevant sentence, would deflect me."

Rubin said, "The remark might have been misanthropically in character, and you interpreted it wrongly because of your own happy associations with the holidays. What the suspect might have meant was that Christmas was just as full of superstitions as Halloween."

Alexander said, "An interesting thought, but the expression on his face and the tone of his voice belied that. The expression was happy, delighted. I am *still* sure he meant it as a loving remark."

Gonzalo said, "He could be a *Peanuts* fan and was thinking of Linus' 'Great Pumpkin,' which is a kind of satire on Santa Claus. That would set up a strong association between Halloween and Christmas."

There was a general hoot from the audience, but Alexander held up his hand. "Actually, that's the first suggestion I hadn't thought of myself. It doesn't sound in the least likely to me, but I will check whether or not he was a *Peanuts* fan."

Trumbull said, "We don't have enough to go on. I don't think anything can be deduced from what he said to set your mind at ease. Sorry."

Drake said, "I agree, but we haven't heard from Henry yet."

"Henry?" said Alexander in surprise, swiveling in his seat.

Henry cleared his throat. "I admit, gentlemen, that a thought entered my mind the moment Mr. Alexander gave us the suspect's remark."

"Oh?" said Alexander, "and just what thought was that?"

"The suspect, sir, did not say, as you or I might have said, that Halloween was just like Christmas or just as good as Christmas, or even equivalent to Christmas. If you quoted him correctly he said Halloween was 'precisely equal' to Christmas. Surely that sounds like a mathematician speaking and would be in character."

Alexander snorted. "Feeble. A non-mathematician might have happened to put it that way if he were a meticulous person."

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Henry said softly, "Perhaps. Yet we might find more in the statement if we treat it mathematically than anyone has yet pointed out. After all, if your suspect were indeed the guilty man, he would be not only a mathematician, but a computer specialist."

Alexander looked annoyed. "What has that to do with it?"

Henry said, "Mr. Alexander, listening to the gentlemen of the Black Widowers month after month is an education in itself and there have been times when I have pursued my reading in the directions they have opened up for me. Mr. Halsted, for instance, once discussed the rationale behind positional notation, the manner in which our Arabic numerals are constructed, and I went on to read further about the matter. If you'd care to have me explain it, I'm sure Mr. Halsted will be glad to correct me if I make a mistake."

Halsted said, "I'll be glad to, Henry, but I don't see what you're driving at."

"You will in a moment, sir. Our ordinary numbers are written to the base ten. The first column at the right are the ones. The next to the left are the tens, the next are the hundreds or ten times ten, the next are the thousands or ten times ten times ten, and so on. Thus, the number, 1231, is *one* times a thousand plus *two* times a hundred plus *three* times ten plus *one,* and that comes to 1231."

"Right so far," said Halsted.

"But there's no need to consider ten the only possible base for a number system," said Henry. "You could use nine, for instance. The right-hand column in a nine-based system would be ones, the next to the left would be nines, the next would be eighty-ones or nine times nine, the next would be—uh—seven hundred twenty-nines or nine times nine times nine, and so on. The number 1231 would, in the nine-based system, be *one* times seven hundred twenty-nine plus *two* times eighty-one plus *three* times nine plus *one.* That would be, if you would allow me a moment to work it out, the equivalent of 919 in our ordinary ten-based system."

He scribbled hastily on a menu and held it up. "You could write the result this way: 1231 (nine-based) = 919 (ten-based)."

Halsted, Drake, and Rubin nodded. Avalon and Trumbull looked thoughtful, and Alexander shook his head impatiently.

Gonzalo said, "But why would anyone use a nine-based system and multiply nines?"

Halsted said, "The other number-bases look complicated, Mario,

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only because our number system is designed to fit ten as a base. Mathematically, all are equally rational, though some are more convenient than others. For instance, in computers, it is particularly useful at times to use—uh, oh—"

He looked at Henry with a grin and said, "I get it, Henry, but you keep on and finish."

"Thank you, sir," said Henry. "As Mr. Halsted was about to say, the eight-based system is, I understand, useful to computers. The number thirty-one, for instance, in the ten-based system is, of course, *three* times ten plus *one,* or thirty-one. In the eight-based system, however, it is *three* times eight plus *one,* or twenty-five.

"We can therefore write"—he used the menu again—"31 (eight-based) = 25 (ten-based)."

He went on, "The different number bases are sometimes given names derived from the Latin names of the numbers. The Latin for ten is 'decem,' so a ten-based number belongs to the decimal system. The Latin for eight is 'octo,' so eight-based numbers belong to the octal system. We can therefore write this—31 (octal) = 25 (decimal).

"By coincidence, in 'octo' and 'decem' we have the months October and December—"

Rubin roared in sudden delight. "No coincidence at all. The Romans before Julius Caesar's time started their year in March. By that system, October was the eight month and December the tenth month, and they were named accordingly."

Henry nodded his head and said, "Thank you, sir. If, then, we abbreviate the terms 'octal' and 'decimal' in a natural way and omit the parentheses we have—31 Oct = 25 Dec. How can this be described better than by saying that Halloween, which falls on 31 October, is *precisely equal* to Christmas, which falls on 25 December."

Alexander's mouth had tended to slacken through this but now he tightened his jaw muscle and said, "Are you trying to tell me that the thief, blurting out his remark without thinking, gave away the fact that he was a computer expert?"

"Yes, sir," said Henry. "It was not out of embarrassment that a look of alarm crossed his face and that he left as soon as he could. It must have been out of fright at the thought of having slipped into his real character. —At that moment, if the significance of his remark had been seen by you, it would have been wise to arrange for his arrest."

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Alexander looked chagrined. "Well, I didn't see it—I interpreted it the wrong way. —But wait, all this is clever and may even be right considering that the man in question proved to be the criminal, but how would you account for that look of love on his face? *That* was what threw me."

Henry said softly, "You are a family man, sir, and that is your point of view. You naturally interpret love in human terms alone. I, myself, am not a family man, and I know that love is broader than that. Even a misanthrope who hates the human race could love, and deeply too."

"Love what?" said Alexander impatiently.

"The beauty and surprises of mathematics, for one thing," said Henry.

CRIMINALIMERICK

BLACK WIDOWERS: HALSTED

by D. R. BENSEN

The Widowers' resident poet
Is a limerick freak, and he'll show it
With manful decision,
In spite of derision—
Is he patterned on someone? You know it!

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a NEW crime story by

JOHN BALL

When envy and hate of another person seethe constantly inside someone's mind, when resentment and humiliation are added irritants, the mixture can come to boiling point—and spill over. And in some cases the spilling over takes the form of the most drastic action man is capable of—especially if the act is safe, air-tight, and with no motive visible to the police . . . John Ball, creator of Virgil Tibbs, writes in an almost documentary style, full of realistic and convincing detail, and with a deep sense of justice . . .

FULL CIRCLE

by JOHN BALL

It was three minutes to four in the morning. Lying wide-awake, Walter Kaskow watched the tip of the luminous minute hand as it reached upward toward the hour. Once again he listened to the steady, slow breathing that told him his wife was still deep in sleep. Then he turned his attention back to the clock, and waited.

At precisely the moment that the hands indicated the hour he slid noiselessly out of bed and carefully replaced the covers behind him. It was still pitch-dark, but the excitement of the day already charged the air. The time had come at last to shave, dress, leave the house as quietly as possible, meet Fred, and do the thing he had planned.

At 4:14 Walter crept silently downstairs, fully dressed except for his shoes which he held tightly in his left hand. The street light in front of the house filtered just enough light through the living-room window to show where each piece of furniture stood. With careful self-indulgence he eased himself into the one comfortable chair and put his shoes down without a sound on the ten-year-old carpet. Letting his weight settle into a position in

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which he could relax, Walter looked about him in the near darkness, then crinkled his face into a tight-lipped, satisfied smile.

The first move had gone precisely as he had planned; he was up, dressed, and out of the bedroom exactly one hour ahead of schedule. Mabel would sleep on now, and he would not have to resort to the thin excuse, if caught, that he had been too stimulated to sleep any longer. He had before him one clear, silent, uninterrupted hour to go over every detail in his mind—to be sure, absolutely sure, he had overlooked nothing.

He began by reviewing his relationship with Fred. He tried to put himself in the position of an expert investigator. What was there to be found out?

Fred and Irma Ziegler had bought and moved into the house next door last spring. There had been no previous contact between the families. Almost from the first day the Zieglers and the Kaskows had been neighborly; by midsummer they had become good friends. Irma Ziegler would state that her husband and Walter had always been on the best of terms. So would Mabel, who was asleep upstairs.

In his hearty, blustering, loud style Fred himself would have to lay it on thick, claiming he and Walter were inseparable companions—that is, if Fred would ever have been called upon to testify, which he wouldn't since in about three more hours he would be dead.

Not once, Walter knew, had he ever given the slightest hint to anyone of his true feelings about Fred. Months ago he had realized the need to keep the secret, and he had done so. There was proof of that, because if either Irma or Mabel had had the least doubt, one of them would have said something before now. That was what made the whole thing completely air-tight; there was no visible motive anywhere.

In fact, just the opposite. At worst, Walker might be thought to have envied Fred, but many people could have done that. Fred was the kind of man who looked and acted success. He mixed easily and knew people from one end of the city to the other. Because he had his own auto dealership, he could come and go as he pleased. Walter, on the other hand, had had three jobs during the past two years, none of them very important.

When Walter had badly needed a better car, Fred had stepped in and generously sold him one of his best used cars at a give-away price. But it was Fred who was always one notch ahead, Fred

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who had the bigger and better house, who cheerfully and easily won almost all the card games they played, who was clever with his hands and could make things, whose loud voice filled the room, whose jokes were always newer and funnier, who was now building an even bigger and better new house.

Walter caught himself; he sucked in a quick breath and deliberately snapped this line of thought. Danger lay that way! One single outburst, even the smallest hint, and he was finished, done for.

He looked toward the window. Outside the first gray of dawn was visible in the sky. Seated where he was, Walter could see past the street light and into the dying night beyond. It was now close to 4:30. He knew that he had to settle down and use the next 30 minutes to review every detail of his plan.

He began with the dinner party. Before he could start where he had intended, his mind jumped to Mabel's remark when they had been together at home afterward. Her voice came back to him: "Isn't it wonderful, Walter, that Fred and Irma are our friends! You can learn so much from him, and he has so many connections. He really likes you and some day, maybe, he'll do something wonderful for you."

Walter pushed back his feelings mechanically as he had done so many times before. Fred's death would wipe the slate clean; it would settle for all time who was the better man, the cleverer, the more resourceful. No one else would know, no one but he, Walter, and that was all that counted now.

Consciously he returned to the dinner party and relived the conversation. Fred, of course, was talking.

"Ever eat venison before, Walter?"

So that was what it was. The piece of meat turned into something tasteless in his mouth; he pushed it in front of his teeth and held it there where he couldn't accidentally swallow any more. Fred just sat there and grinned.

"What's the matter, Walter?" Mabel asked. "Is anything wrong?"

Walter clamped his napkin in front of his mouth and pushed the bit of half-chewed meat into it before he replied.

"I'm sorry. I don't want to eat deer meat. I—I like animals."

"Well, a cow's an animal, you know." Fred leaned back and patted his big middle. "And you eat beef all the time. You want to get over that, Walt. Wait till you've gone out into the woods, shot

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yourself a squirrel, skinned him, and cooked him for your dinner. Sure, I like animals too, always have, but face up to the facts of life, man. Meat is a big part of our diet. Millions of animals would never be born if they weren't raised strictly for food."

Walter picked up his fork and carefully ate a mouthful of mashed potatoes. He remembered his role, and played it carefully.

"I'm sorry, Fred. I saw a deer killed on the highway once and it kind of make me sick."

"Why, of course, Walt, nobody likes to see anything get hurt that way. I tell you what—I've been meaning to mention this anyway—how about going out hunting with me when the season opens in a couple of weeks? You'll feel differently when you've been out of doors with a gun in your hand and maybe brought in some meat for your own table. Remember, one quick accurate shot that drops an animal in its tracks doesn't hurt it."

"Go ahead," Mabel urged, "I think it's a fine idea." To her everything Fred proposed was a fine idea.

Now he must be careful! "I'd like to, Fred, for the sake of your company, but honestly I don't know the first thing about guns or how to shoot."

"That's easy. I'll lend you a book. Get it right now." Despite his bulk, Fred got up with enthusiasm and disappeared into his den. He was back in a few moments with a large volume. On the cover there was a color plate of a spotted dog, pointing.

"Here, take this home with you. It'll tell you everything you need to know. I'd be glad to lend you a gun, but I don't have a spare. Tell you what I'll do, though: you get yourself a gun and if you don't really want to keep it after you've tried it out, I'll take it off your hands. Go down to Blanley Sporting Goods and ask for Jack Marino; he's a friend of mine. Tell him I sent you and he'll take good care of you."

So it had all been Fred's idea; there were two witnesses to prove that. Walter had dutifully studied part of the book, including particularly the chapter on "Precautions in Handling a Gun." Then he had visited Jack Marino and bought a simple beginner's rifle, not too complicated, inexpensive—just the kind he would have been expected to buy.

The date had been set for this morning. Up at five, a half hour to dress and eat, then out to go hunting.

There was no flaw. It was Fred's own idea. He had planned the trip. He had recommended the gun salesman who would testify that

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he had waited on Mr. Walter Kaskow at the specific request of Mr. Fred Ziegler. It was well-known that Walter Kaskow was a close friend and neighbor of Fred Ziegler and indebted to him for many favors. And he had never felt, or shown, the slightest romantic inclinations toward Mrs. Ziegler.

Through the side window Walter saw a light come on in the kitchen of the house next door. Fred was up ahead of schedule, ten minutes early at least. But he didn't know that Walter had got up earlier still. For once Fred's overflowing energy had been outdone. As he thought of Fred's energy, Walter laughed a little to himself. How much energy does a corpse have, how many people can it influence, how much money can it make? A quick, wild sense of power hit Walter like a sharp fist. He reached down and began noiselessly to lace his shoes.

It was close to a forty-mile drive to the spot where Fred planned to park the car. Through the hour-long trip Walter listened and asked questions; it was the thing he would have been expected to do. Fred drove easily as he talked about hunting as one of the great and useful sports.

"You want to understand, Walt, that wild life gets a much better break than you think. Take deer: they're protected by law throughout the year—only a few weeks are open season. If they were left entirely alone, they would breed so fast that something drastic would have to be done. The law is wise, it's set up so that the deer population is controlled and protected at the same time. And one deer can put meat on the table for a good part of the winter."

Fred paused to swing off the main highway onto a good secondary road.

"The place we're going to today is private property and posted; the guy who owns it is a good customer of mine and invites me out every year. Chances are there won't be anyone else around, so you don't need to worry that someone will take a pot shot at you."

It was twenty minutes of seven when Fred pulled the car off into a patch of hard stubble and set the brake. Then he reached for a vacuum bottle. "Let's have a cup of coffee," he invited. "Then we'll head for the woods. Got everything?"

Walter slapped his pockets for ammunition, chocolate bars, and the other things Fred had suggested. Then he accepted a plastic cup of steaming coffee and let the hot liquid run down the inside of his throat. Fred heaved his bulk out of the car.

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"Come on, Walt, let's go," he said as he tucked the car keys deep into one of his pockets. Walter carefully opened the door on his side and stepped out. He waited while Fred prepared his new gun and handed it to him. Then they set off together across the open field toward the woods beyond.

Walter was thinking furiously now. As Fred strode beside him, something inside began to warn him of the enormity of the things he had planned to do. Almost viciously he thrust the thought aside; he had gone too far, planned too well, to stop now. Of course he could change his mind and no one would ever know. He considered that for a moment—to lead Fred to the very edge of his death and then spare him: it would take a man of power to do that.

Fred suddenly slapped his heavy arm across Walter's shoulders. "Walt," he exclaimed abruptly, "today may be a big day for you. Give you a chance to prove you're a man."

A spasm of violent resentment seized Walter; he controlled himself only with an heroic effort. By the time he had himself fully in hand once more, they were close to the trees. Fred stopped to give instructions.

"Remember now, Walt, that a gun is a dangerous thing when it isn't carefully handled. Don't drag it through a fence behind you. Well, you read all that in the book I lent you. Just remember not to shoot until you're sure of your target. Normally you'll have plenty of time to spot what you're aiming at. I don't think anyone else is out here this morning—I didn't see any other cars parked—but there may be cows or other animals around.

"Maybe it would be best for a while if you didn't shoot at all unless I give the word. That way I'll take full responsibility. After you have a little more experience under your belt, you can go it on your own. Understand I'm not trying to tell you what to do, just trying to help you get started right. Okay, let's go in. You follow me."

Walter followed. He was thinking very carefully now. This was the one part that couldn't have been planned in advance. He would have to watch, wait, and be extremely cautious. When the right moment came, he would have to recognize it and act quickly, without hesitation. His mind thought of nothing else now—it closed itself tightly against any distraction. This was the beginning of the true test.

As they passed under the first of the trees, Walter could no

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longer fight back the cold chill of warning that was hammering inside him. He let the thought come, take possession of him, and have its say. Then he deliberately pushed it aside and concentrated on the constant humiliation he had suffered at the hands of the big man in front of him, the successful man who had everything given to him the easy way, who everyone agreed was his superior. Walter tightened his grip on his new gun. "Superior"—the word burned hatred into his brain.

Carefully Walter reviewed the remaining details of his plan. At the right moment he would shoot, calmly and deliberately. He would take the remote chance that there might be a witness, but if he could not see a witness, then a witness could only have at best a poor view of him. He could look around freely, as though he were trying to spot game, of course. And then, immediately after the shot, he would rush up, drop his gun, and cry aloud.

If there was a witness, Walter's fright and shock would be readily apparent. But more than that, if he missed, if Fred were only hurt and lived to tell what had happened, Fred himself would testify that it had been an accident, the fault of a rank beginner whom Fred himself had encouraged to come into the woods with him. A beginner who everyone would state was his close friend.

Most important of all, he must *feel* that a terrible accident had occurred. There would be police to talk to later, Irma to face. The only safe way was to believe completely in the terrible disaster; only after it was all over would he be able to begin the secret enjoyment of his triumph. Right now he wouldn't even consider the consequences of failure. He would not fail.

For nearly an hour they worked their way through the woods. Walter saw no game. Several times Fred signaled him to stop, and brought his gun up to his shoulder, but he did not fire. Each time Walter trembled in silent excitement; he wanted to hear the gun discharged, wanted Fred to start the shooting. In that way it would be partly Fred's fault. He remembered a long-forgotten phrase he had learned in his schooldays: "Those who live by the sword . . ."

Walter was ready now; the time had come. They had been in the woods long enough. If it had happened too soon—say, during the first ten minutes or so—it would have been suspicious. Now, with cold calculation, Walter began to watch for something over which he might legitimately trip. He found a protruding root, looked up, and was afraid to act. He found another, and stepped

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over it carefully. His nerve, schooled for so long, began to trickle away like the sands in the top of an hourglass.

Fred stopped and threw up his hand; Walter stopped behind him. They waited silently, motionless. Then, slowly, Fred raised his gun. Automatically Walter raised his too. Fred crept forward a half dozen steps as noiselessly as his bulk would allow. Walter followed more slowly; as he stopped he felt a raised tree root beside his foot.

With an electric thrill he realized this was exactly what he had planned to find: himself behind Fred, Fred's attention distracted, and something under his feet over which he could plausibly stumble and lose his balance.

Then Fred spoke: "Be quiet, Walt. I'll handle this."

As the seconds ticked, Walter let the implications soak into his mind. He was the inferior, he would always be the inferior, he would never be able to catch up, unless—unless—

The silence was shattered by the sharp terrifying slam of Fred's gun. Before the echo had died away, Fred fired again, and a third time quickly afterward.

Now!

Walter made no actual decision to do it. He had lived this moment so many times in his imagination, rehearsed it so many times in his mind, that it required no decision. The reports from Fred's gun unlocked the fear of his own gun which had frozen Walter's hands. He aimed just under Fred's left shoulder—and fired.

For an instant Walter thought he had missed; Fred said nothing and did not move. Then his knees unlocked and his big body began to fall. Fred turned, and for a stricken, paralyzing moment his eyes looked directly into Walter's. They showed pain, bewilderment, and a hopeless plea for help. Then Fred fell heavily to the ground and lay horribly still.

Walter screamed, forcing the air with all possible pressure from his lungs. He dropped his gun and rushed to where Fred lay. Dropping to his knees, he had a blinding reaction that he must do something—he must help! Fred's face was half buried in the earth; Walter tried hard to turn him over. When he succeeded, Fred's open eyes stared unseeing at the sky. A cold, gripping panic seized Walter and he wanted desperately, at any cost, to undo what he had just done. He was in trouble, terrible trouble, and he needed help—Fred's help.

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Terrified and stricken, he somehow found his way out of the woods. Using the keys he had forced himself to take from Fred's pocket, he started the car with ice-cold fingers and managed to turn it back onto the road. He stopped at the first place that had a telephone and called the police.

He did not tell his story as he had planned. Instead he blurted out a confused, wild report that in every sentence seemed to be crying out his guilt. When he was finished, he put his head into his hands and knew he could never face an inquest, or a trial, and carry it off the way he had so carefully planned.

All that obsessed him was the look in Fred's eyes as he had died—the pain, the bewilderment, the plea for mercy. Mercy that Walter would have given his soul to be able to offer now. He was not sure he still possessed a soul. The triumph he had anticipated was stillborn as he was engulfed by a sense of irreparable loss. It was made more agonizing by the terrible knowledge that he had brought it onto himself. If only he hadn't! But he knew that he had; his friend and protector was gone, never to return.

Walter wept, and wanted to die.

He was not held. The quiet, friendly man who offered him his comfort and consoled him was a far keener observer than Walter had ever visualized. The man knew that Walter's shock and desperate grief were genuine, and so stated in his report. He was not clairvoyant and therefore did not sense the true reason for Walter's stricken misery. Walter was allowed to go home to face his wife, and Fred's widow, Irma.

In six months' time his wound failed to heal. Walter sat by himself and tried to lash his intellect into a sense of triumph, but it would not come. Each day as he returned home from work, knowing his job could not last much longer, he looked at the *For Sale* sign in front of the house that had been Fred's and was now Irma's. Then one day the house was sold.

Irma came to say goodbye. The whole thing had to be gone over once more—Irma's forgiveness, her understanding that it had been an accident, the reassurances they would continue to be close friends. This time she carried something in her hands. Walter looked at it and knew it was some sort of expensive camera.

Irma looked at him and spoke with quiet dignity. "Walter, I want you to have this. It is Fred's camera. It's a very fine one. Fred loved to use it and he told me more than once how he hoped

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to interest you in photography. He—he wasn't a very good photographer himself; perhaps you will be a better one and take the kind of pictures he always knew this camera could get. He would want you to have it, I'm sure, because wherever he is now, he feels the same way I do."

Walter took the camera in his hands and stared at it. The name Rolleiflex meant nothing to him; he wanted to throw it away, not touch it. As it lay in his hands, a new thought came to him. It was a link: the first tenuous tie back to the man whom he had destroyed. Walter's eyes turned wet. Irma pressed her hands over his, forcing the camera tighter in his grasp, then walked quickly out through the front door. The latch closed with a gentle click behind her.

Walter knew he could not go on as he was; he must recover himself, get back his composure. His job was tottering; he would have lost it long ago, but an understanding management had overlooked his sudden ineptitude for long patient weeks. But even a job as minor as his had to be done well and he had no skills to offer anywhere else. The camera might help—it would give him something new to do.

He borrowed several library books on photography and read them. He found one devoted to the exact camera he now owned and purchased a copy. Mabel encouraged him and made little meaningless suggestions with the thought that they might help him.

The camera did help. Each time the dark terrible cloud began to gather once more in his mind, Walter reached for the camera and practised with the gadgets that controlled its mechanism. Then he would take a few more pictures of Mabel with whatever light was available. The quality of his pictures slowly improved; he began to make fewer errors and gradually learned which lens openings and shutter speeds to use. He bought a tripod and the fuzziness that was evident in many of his earlier snapshots disappeared. Mabel showed some of his pictures to Irma, whom she went to see for that purpose. When she returned, she told Walter that Irma had a cozy little apartment and was very busy with her charity work.

On the first warm day of spring the idea came to Walter. It seemed strange to him that he had not thought of it before. It frightened him, but at the same time it promised him something he desperately wanted.

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He knew where Fred was. Not in the cemetery where he had stood and watched his remains being lowered into the carefully draped grave. Fred was out in the woods where he had last been alive. Walter wanted to go there and commune with him. He was sure that if he went there, with Fred's camera in his hands, it would be the first step back to where he had been. Fred would not come back to life, of course, but part of the pressure that was relentlessly torturing Walter might be lifted. Fred, wherever he was, might even see to it. If he were alive, Walter knew, Fred would help. He was always like that; he liked to help people.

Walter did not want to return to the exact spot; he was terrified of that. Just the woods, any woods would do. And Walter knew where he was going. There was a low hill only a few miles away that commanded a good view from its top. At least it should, Walter reasoned. He would be able to take some fine shots with the new color film he was learning to use.

When he told Mabel, she offered to go with him. Almost harshly Walter told her he wanted to go alone and for once Mabel understood correctly. She kissed him goodbye before Walter drove off to keep the appointment that his dreadful secret had made for him. He knew he was pursuing something he could not hope to catch, but the very act of trying made him feel better.

He drove his car up to the base of the woods that crowned the hill and parked the car off the road. With a grim sense of reliving something he carefully put his car key into the same pocket Fred had put his. It helped, he felt, to tune himself to Fred's frequency, to indicate that he wanted to reach out and meet Fred halfway.

He roamed the woods all morning, feeling the yielding ground under his feet and wondering if any other human had ever followed exactly the same trail. A tiny sense of adventure came over him. He remembered Fred's instructions, "Be quiet, Walt. I'll handle this." There were no guns now, no danger, only a camera Walter knew how to use. He did not need Fred to help him here; he could go it very well on his own.

For the very first time a long dormant sense of triumph began to filter into his brain. It was all over long ago, and he *had* fooled everybody. There was no Fred now to make him walk in the rear, to be the general in command. It was an army of one now and General Walter Kaskow had assumed command. He took a few steps forward while the trees all about him stood respectfully at attention. He turned and faced in four different directions; no

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other human being challenged the supremacy of his position.

Walter commanded his lips to speak, to utter a phrase that they feared. "I'm glad I did it," he whispered.

In that moment a new sense of power flooded over him. Not because Fred was out of the way, but because he had done a thing few men would have dared to do, and he had succeeded. There was no way he could be found out now. He and Mabel could go somewhere else; he might even change his name to a more impressive one, one which would command more respect. Walter marched forward through the sentinel trees and felt he was discovering virgin soil.

He halted his advance when the trees abruptly thinned out and revealed a panoramic view of the countryside below. Walter looked down and smiled; there below were the thousands he had successfully deceived, who did not know the power of the man who stood on the hill looking down at them. He had been right—coming to the woods, for the first time in months, had restored his balance and his ego.

Walter stepped back into the secrecy of the woods. He liked the idea of being out of view, someone no one knew was there. He picked a comfortable spot, sat down, and began to unwrap the lunch Mabel had packed for him. It had been a nuisance to carry, but now it had earned its passage.

Walter chewed the two sandwiches and regretted only slightly that he had nothing liquid with which to wash them down. His newfound sense of power made it a minor hardship of battle, something every great commander had to endure. It was only a slight discomfort, which made it all the better. A tiny gust of wind picked up a crumpled piece of waxed paper that lay beside him and danced it across the ground.

A scrap of paper was a clue, a betrayer of the fact that he had been there. Amused with himself, he crept four paces on all fours to retrieve it. If he was to be the phantom of the woods, there must be nothing left to betray—

The sharp startling bark of a gun hit his ears at the same moment a stab of frightful pain paralyzed his side. Walter tried to spring to his feet, but agony conquered him and he fell to the ground.

He gasped in a hard breath and a streak of terror stabbed him; his brain would not respond to his commands. He gasped again and at that moment his stricken mind told him he had been shot.

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"No!" he screamed. With violent rage he demanded that the pain be made to disappear. He could not move. His ears told him someone was running toward him, someone who would help.

His eyes began to refuse the orders of his brain. The pain was getting worse, worse. What would heal him? He could not—could not—continue in this unbearable pain. He—

His eyes saw the blood, his blood, spreading rapidly over his shirt and the top of his trousers. A terrible, unbelievable, utterly impossible thought struck him—he might be dying.

He could not! He was Walter Kaskow, the great Walter Kaskow, the true unsuspected genius who had fooled everyone.

His brain began to swim. The woods about him grew. He was frantic now, desperate. His ego screamed at the outrage, and he knew complete and utter terror.

His mouth was open wide at the moment he died. His eyes stared up unseeing at the sky as the eyes of another dead man had done a half a year before.

A man bent over him and with expert hands checked for a heartbeat. Then he stopped, because he knew the man on the ground was dead. He turned and with the restrained pace of an elderly man made the best time he could out of the woods.

The two patrol officers stood looking down at the body.

"There's no doubt about it," the senior man said. "You can see clearly where he was dragging himself along the ground. Why he did that we'll never know. He must have known how dangerous that was with the county now open for small-game hunting."

He hitched up his Sam Browne belt as he turned toward the elderly man who still held his light hunting piece in his hands. "I'm not saying this officially, but I don't believe you need to blame yourself at all for this. It was clearly an accidental shooting. You thought he was some small game crawling on the ground. Did you know this man?"

The elderly man shook his head; he seemed completely unnerved. The other policeman laid a hand on his shoulder. "We'll have to take your name and address, of course, and it might be best if you followed us down in your car so that we can make a full report. I'll radio for the coroner's crew to come up and take care of the body."

The officer produced a notebook. "Your name?" he asked, trying to make it sound casual.

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"Herbert William Sandski," the elderly man replied. He moved his lips with an effort. The officer wrote.

"Herbert William Sandski," the officer repeated. "What do you do, sir?"

The man looked down at the shape that lay before him on the ground. When he turned his back to the sight, there were tears in his eyes. Without being told, he began to walk in the direction from which the three of them had come.

The older patrolman touched his partner's arm. "Sandski, remember?" he asked.

The other officer shook his head.

"It's strange, him of all people," his partner confided. "You ought to know. He was the state executioner."

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THE LONG BLACK CORD

by *MILDRED H. ARTHUR*

Ever so carefully Melba Carmichael pushed aside the white ruffled curtain at her dining room window and lifted the edge of the blind—lifted it just enough to sneak a look across the yard to the house next door. Not a soul in sight. Mrs. Teake's one-story brick dwelling sat quiescent, crowned in morning light. Set in its sward of green, it was a house seemingly as peaceful, as unhostile, as all the others in the suburban, middle-class neighborhood. But Melba knew better.

She dropped the blind and went back to the kitchen where she had left the breakfast dishes soaking in the sink. Glad for something to keep her hands, if not her mind, occupied, she pulled on her rubber gloves and set to work.

She was scrubbing hard at the frying pan when the phone rang. Pan in mid-air, she froze. It seemed to her that her breathing had stopped. The phone rang again. And again. The sound drilled through her like an electric current. She closed her eyes and counted the rings: eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve.

It seemed an eternity before the silence took over. She drew herself up then and filled her lungs. But even before she had expelled her breath, the ringing started again. Her eyes flew open and she went on counting the rings—a long siege of fifteen, then silence. In a moment the ringing picked up again. This time it seemed to go on and on . . .

Now she knew—knew for sure what she had dreaded all along—that her coming home was no longer a secret, that her

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presence in the house had been detected. The one person whom she had determined should not know had obviously found out. There could be no mistaking it. No one else could be at the other end of the wire. No one else would be that persistent. It was only a matter of time now before the ringing of the phone gave way to a knocking at her door. The ringing had only been a prelude to the visit.

Suddenly faint, she took off her rubber gloves and sat down on the stool by the now silent telephone, trying to piece together what was happening to her. Five days ago she had taken a taxi home from the hospital after her surgery, slipped into her house long after dark, long after the hour when her next-door neighbor usually retired.

She had drawn the black window blinds down to the sill to be sure no light leaked out, and, with enough food stocked to last her several weeks, she had retreated behind the walls of her house. Hiding behind blinds, she realized, could not be a permanent solution. She hoped only to buy a little time to enable her to recuperate from the surgery, and then to get herself in hand. That was what she told herself she had to do: get Melba Carmichael in hand.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember when it had all started. It was not hard to trace back. She had become aware of the situation gradually, over a period of several years. Casually, innocently almost, as if it had infiltrated in some osmotic fashion, a change had taken place. In the beginning very little had seemed out of the ordinary.

Melba remembered the day she had first seen Mrs. Teake—the day she had moved into this house. Packing cases were everywhere. The bulky old furniture, that had belonged to her parents, stood about in tentative places. It looked lumpish and awkward, if not downright out of place. The moving men had been gone only a matter of minutes, and the rooms were an impossible clutter, when she went to the front door in answer to the bell.

On the threshold stood an elderly lady with a small gray head nodding like a dried little flower on a stem. Through the thick lenses of her spectacles her eyes looked enormous.

"I'm Mrs. Teake, your next-door neighbor." Her voice was high, thin, and penetrating as a knife blade. "I've brought you a peach cobbler. It's still warm from the oven."

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Melba responded to the gesture, if not the presence. "That's very good of you. Won't you come in?"

"I don't suppose this is a very good time—"

Melba made an apologetic gesture toward the cartons. "If you don't mind the mess, I'd like it if you'd join me for a cup of tea. I could use the break. I unpacked my teapot first thing."

Mrs. Teake seemed eager and Melba had no difficulty in discovering why. Within the first few minutes of the visit she learned that Mr. Teake had been dead for many years, that Mrs. Teake herself was not well. Besides her deteriorating sight, she had severe bursitis in her left shoulder. She had no family and no one to talk to all day—except her neighbors.

"I've always had good neighbors," she said in her high excitable voice. "I've had to depend on the kindness of my neighbors. Mrs. Hartley was a great help to me. This was her house, you know. She lived here for many years. It was very sad, her passing away so suddenly."

Her head nodded mechanically; her magnified eyes took on a watery, distant look, as vague as lamplights bathed in fog. It was as if she had withdrawn to the gloomy recesses of a secret room where few were allowed to enter.

Melba discovered in herself a surprising annoyance. She almost felt she was called on to apologize for having bought and moved into Mrs. Hartley's house. "I would hope that we can be good neighbors too," she said, pouring boiling water into the teapot.

"Oh, my dear, I *know* we will be good neighbors—and good friends too."

Melba, for some reason uneasy, had gulped down her tea too quickly. She found the physical presence of the woman irritating. That shriveled head bobbing like a dried pod on a frail stick stirred in her a vague discontent. Her gaze kept zeroing in on her visitor's scrawny, wrinkled neck. Inexplicably Mrs. Teake's neck provided a focus for all of Melba's irritation. Still she realized that the woman was to be pitied, old and alone as she was.

Melba herself was alone—now that her aged and difficult mother had finally passed on—though she had no reason to feel sorry for herself. If anything, she considered herself lucky. She had only Melba to see to now. Still, her nature demanded that she show some charity toward the less fortunate. Mrs. Teake, after all, had no one to turn to in time of trouble.

"If you need anything," she told her neighbor, "don't hesitate to

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call. The phone is connected. Just make a note of my number."

Early the following morning Melba had been jarred out of a sound sleep by the ringing of the phone. "Hello," Melba said.

"Miss Carmichael, this is Mrs. Teake." Her voice, shrill as a jungle bird's, sounded as if she were on the verge of hysteria.

"Anything wrong? Are you all right?" Melba asked, alarmed.

"To tell you the truth, I woke feeling poorly. My bursitis is acting up again. I wondered if you would be going downtown today. I need a few things at the drugstore . . . and the grocery."

Sharply awake now, Melba cleared her throat to gain a little settling time. It took her a moment or two before she realized that the woman's everyday voice suggested hysteria. Taking a deep breath to quiet her nerves, Melba said, "Yes, I'll be going downtown later to stock my refrigerator—after I get my kitchen cleared. I'll stop by and get your order."

Every day thereafter, often several times a day, the calls came. Often a single phone conversation lasted over an hour. By the time she hung up Melba felt she had been wrung dry. Many of the boxes remained unpacked; the cupboards and closets continued to be disorganized. She could not seem to get herself together.

It was months before she considered her house even habitable. Often she thought: If only I could cut the old woman short! But open rudeness, impoliteness—these were unthinkable. It had always been necessary for her to maintain good relations with people. She could not sleep at night believing someone did not think well of her.

Even in making important life decisions, and in conflict with her innermost desires, she felt she had often been trapped into agreeableness and consent. She could not help herself. When unpleasant tasks were assigned to her she never shirked them. Unlike her sister Emily, who had said a precise and positive "No" to taking care of their invalid mother when the time came for such care, Melba, unmarried and always amenable, had assumed the entire burden.

Her small, lady-like but hard-working hands had performed with remarkable efficiency the endless and sordid functions needed to keep her mother alive. It had been no easy task, especially with someone as demanding as her mother had been. More times than she cared to admit Melba had, in the dim corridors of her mind, tripped over resentment. But she had endured—because

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that was her way. The neighbors had commented on the remarkable care she had given her mother. They had spoken of Melba's saint-like qualities in her filial devotion until the very end.

The phone hung serene for the moment, placid in its niche on the recessed wall. Melba, dizzy from staring at it, shut her eyes to relieve herself of the burden. Since moving into this house so much of her trouble seemed to be associated with the telephone. Though her mind could not grasp a single moment, a single episode that suggested any plan or design, she thought that her problems might have begun when the phone calls first began to take on that unreal quality.

She would listen to her neighbor's voice as if from infinitely far away, as if she, Melba, had gone beyond time and space and were floating somewhere out in the vast reaches with only a phone cord holding her in place, and that high windy pitiful voice asking for her help. As soon as she had hung up she would think, with such violence that it made her shaky, about her entrapment on the telephone. In desperation she would escape up the stairs and for some time remain hidden in her bedroom.

But as persistent and harrowing as were the phone calls, the visits were even worse. Unannounced, at any hour of the day, sometimes even at night, Mrs. Teake came knocking at Melba's door. Most often she wanted to borrow something—an egg, a tea bag, a little butter. Other times she apparently needed to talk because she came and stayed on and on and on.

Occasionally a pressure of obligation pushed Melba in ways she could scarcely handle. Like the time her neighbor denied that Melba had picked up, paid for out of her own money, and delivered a long list of grocery items that Mrs. Teake had ordered over the phone. "Don't you remember, Melba?" Mrs. Teake had said, her wrinkled little face drawn up in a squint. "I canceled that order because I discovered I had quite enough food in the house. You remember, don't you?" The head nodded mechanically above the scrawny neck.

There were many things Melba was uncertain of in this life. She would be the first to admit "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." But her frugal parents, especially her mother, had drummed into her the necessity of keeping strict records of all her expenditures, and she never deviated from that practice. Not only did she not remember Mrs. Teake's canceling the order, she distinctly recalled

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her neighbor saying when she telephoned the list, "If you'll just lay out the money, I'll pay you back when you bring in the groceries."

The two large and heavy grocery bags she had lugged into Mrs. Teake's kitchen that day had been the start of the pain that eventually resulted in her surgery. The pain had been so sudden and so severe that she had gone home without asking for the money that was owed her. Later, against Mrs. Teake's continued denial of the debt, Melba even began to have doubts about her own carefully recorded account books.

A while back—she could not remember exactly when—something happened that had preyed on her mind. Even now it was painful to think about. She had run upstairs after an interminably long phone conversation with Mrs. Teake and, in an effort to calm herself, had set to work cleaning out her closet. While sliding the garments across the rack, she had come across a dress she had forgotten, had not worn in such a long time that she wondered if it would still fit her.

She put it on and went into the bathroom to look at herself in the door's full-length mirror. She looked thin as a rail, but then all the women on her mother's side of the family were thin. It seemed to be a family trait. The dress fitted her well enough—the length was right, she observed, as her glance slid upward over her long slender body reflected in the mirror. And then—her skin crawled.

She found herself watching dimly the action of the cords in her neck—a spindling, wrinkled neck as ugly as a chicken's. She saw it only for an instant, before her vision blurred. Her mouth crumpled; she felt like crying, but no tears came. Her mind must have gone blank then because she did not remember anything after that—until she discovered herself some time later sitting hunched over the edge of the bed in silent communion with the wall.

Melba felt sweat breaking out all over. She jumped off the kitchen stool and stood in the middle of the floor, full of the anguish of expectation. She thought she had heard the sound of a light step above her. She held her breath, listening.

The sense that she was often not alone in the house had grown on her. Sometimes, as she moved from room to room, her own cautious tread appeared to be preceded by the footsteps of someone withdrawing just ahead of her, or someone following stealth-

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ily behind. She found herself pausing at the threshold to a room, hesitant to enter, reluctant to retreat. Often she felt she was under surveillance, and kept looking over her shoulder.

She would go to bed early, feeling the strain of a long day, then lie rigid in her bed in the dark, afraid to close her eyes, afraid of what the walls and joists and beams might tell her. It was like a sickness spreading through her.

One morning she had stood bent over the stove, scraping at the burner where a pot of soup had boiled over the night before. The little kitchen radio had been on—not loud (she never cared for loud music)—and she was humming softly the old-fashioned waltz that was coming out of the speaker. It put her in mind of her high-school prom and the beau who had asked her to go with him that evening long ago. Her head was full of remembering, her hands working swiftly over the stove. When she turned around, her heart nearly failed. Standing right behind her was—Mrs. Teake.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," said Mrs. Teake. "Your car was in the garage, so I knew you must be home. I rang your bell over and over again and got no answer. It must be out of order."

Melba went outside and pushed the front doorbell half a dozen times. It made loud clanging sounds all through the house.

"Now isn't that odd?" Mrs. Teake's windy voice blew across Melba's ears. "I must have pressed it the wrong way. The wrong way," Mrs. Teake had repeated, her voice deflating like a spent wind. Then, plaintively, "I need a few things down at the store and wondered if you would have time this afternoon to get them. If not, it's perfectly all right . . ."

"Why didn't you phone?" Melba said, making every effort to keep her voice level.

"Your line was busy."

"Busy? I haven't been talking to anyone."

"But you must have, my dear. Your phone is off the hook."

Melba stiffened, her face the color of ashes. She *knew* she had not talked to anyone on the phone all day.

From then on things had become increasingly intolerable. She remembered the morning when, passing by the downstairs hall mirror, she had received a sudden jolt. The first glimpse, a fleeting one, had drawn her back. She stared, unsure of what she was seeing. The symmetry of her features appeared to have slipped. Her drawn face sitting atop that long stem-like neck seemed like a faintly smudged copy of itself.

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She tried to catch hold of something so that she could handle the anger in her, the frustration, even worse, the fear. But when she attempted to pinpoint the actual cause of her unrest, it dispersed around her like ripples from a stone thrown in a pond.

As the days wore on, her complexion appeared to her to become paler, her features fainter, as though they were being rubbed away. She avoided reflecting surfaces, though she recognized that by doing so she was accomplishing nothing. What she could not foresee was how it was all going to end.

It was fortunate for Melba that her surgery became a necessity when it did. Over the phone she informed Mrs. Teake that she would be leaving for the hospital that morning for a stay of a week, perhaps two. "And I won't be coming home after that," she said, her heart pounding under her rib cage at her first bold-faced lie. "I'll be going out to Ohio to stay with my sister for a while."

"I didn't know you had a sister. Imagine, all this time and you never spoke of her."

Melba flushed and shifted the receiver from one hand to the other.

"How long will you be gone?"

"I really couldn't say." Now that she was done with the lie, now that it was out and past her lips, she was aware of a great and sudden release. But almost at the same instant she found herself caught again in that peculiar chilling division of mind that periodically afflicted her. On the one hand she thought of her neighbor as her enemy. On the other hand she was ashamed of her feelings, her thoughts.

"I do hope you can get someone to shop for you and take care of your errands," she said.

"Please don't worry about me, my dear. Just take care of yourself. I'll see you when you get back."

Her coffee on the sideboard, forgotten until this moment, had got cold. She dumped it into the sink and poured herself another cup from the plugged-in electric perk. As she stood sipping the drink, her eyes, fixed on the kitchen wallpaper, traced the pattern of a greenery-surrounded country cottage with two curtained windows yellow from a spill of sunlight. The windows seemed to draw her. Her hand began to shake so hard she had to put down the cup.

She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes but felt so naked

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and vulnerable without the glasses that she quickly put them back on. Last night's dream returned—if, in fact, it had been a dream. On awakening she had not been at all sure if it had or had not really happened. She had been locked outside her own house and had gone from window to window, hoping to find one open, but at each one she had been confronted by a small gray head bobbing complacently on a dry stem of a neck.

"Let me in," Melba had knocked insistently on the panes of glass. "This is *my* house. Let me in."

The ravaged little face, peering pathetically out from behind the curtains, had continued its silent nodding. In sudden desperation Melba had jammed her fist through a windowpane. The glass had shattered—not with the expected splintering sound, but with the harsh ringing of the telephone.

Her heart jumped now at the sound of ringing. It seemed to merge with the sound from her dream so that for a moment she was not sure she was awake. The ringing continued, bringing her back to the present. She stood eyeing the black instrument intently, then with sudden determination, as if in challenge, she grabbed the receiver and pressed it to her ear.

"Hello, hello." Her voice sounded hoarse to her, unrecognizable. "Hello," she repeated. She heard only the dial tone in reply. Slowly, solemnly, she placed the receiver back on its cradle.

Now Melba knew it was only a matter of minutes before the old woman crossed the lawn and arrived at her front door. A delirium of fear took hold of her. She ran into the blind-darkened living room, squatted down behind the sofa and crouched there, waiting . . . waiting for that unholy dreaded sound of ringing that she knew would come to the front door. Her head was unbearably heavy. She leaned it against the sofa back and closed her eyes, taking in huge gulps of air.

There! On schedule it came, the ringing of the front doorbell. It went on and on, settled into a persistent clanging, as if it were stuck. Melba pressed her hands over her ears.

Abruptly the ringing stopped. Melba did not move. How many steps to the back door? Twenty-five? Thirty? Forty? Slow faltering steps might take a minute and a half, two at the most. Every vein in her was beating violently. In a panic she ran back to the kitchen, hovered like a stricken bird in the middle of the floor. The ringing at the back door had to start—just about *now*.

There it was, that inevitable, unrelenting sound that might

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have been clocked on some devil's timetable. The telephone—the front door—the back door—an agonizing litany of ringing. It filled the room. It seemed to go on forever. . .

When it stopped, the silence was startling. Melba, staring at the locked door, watched fascinated as the knob began to jiggle and turn. A scream gathered at the back of her throat. Her glance flew around the room, crash-landed on the black, wall-mounted instrument and its long black cord. These seemed to burn suddenly with a hard cold light. Her mind at that instant was illuminated with a single crushing thought. A task was suddenly handed to her. Melba was never one to shirk her duty. Her sister, Emily, yes, but not Melba. She could be counted on to do what was necessary.

She wiped the sweat from her forehead. With hands that were remarkably steady she went to the phone and removed the receiver. Holding it, she backed away from the wall niche, uncoiling the long black cord. It swayed seductively. Soon it had reached all the way to the back door. That long black sturdy cord reached easily to the back door where, with renewed force, the knob now rattled and shook.

Melba's hands, moving swift and sure, threaded the receiver through the cord until she was looking at a black, snake-like noose. She concealed it behind her and, holding her gaze steady, set an appropriate smile on her face. Then with her free hand she unlocked and opened the door.

Probably the old woman said something, though Melba's ears were deaf from the hammerblows pounding in her head. She did see the startled look, and the small mouth open and shut, before that irritating scrawny neck gave up its surprising resistance. Melba's hands, now blue-veined and corded with their effort, but still small, still lady-like, worked with swift efficiency to complete the task that had to be done.

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by
GERALD TOMLINSON

Meet Robert Ollinger, "one of the most powerful journalists in Washington," and his junior assistant, Mort Bell, in one of the most bizarre cases of multiple murder on record—bizarre, yet not bizarre in "the formlessness and chaos of modern life," in a world whose newspaper headlines and columns report daily on scandals and scoundrels, madmen and murderers. . .

THE K-BAR-D MURDERS

by GERALD TOMLINSON

Robert Ollinger, the syndicated columnist, swept into the reception area of his K Street office like a dreadnought under full steam. A hulking, combative man of 54, one of the most powerful journalists in Washington, his column *Capitol Hot Line* ran in 112 newspapers from Maine to California. Ollinger dredged up news, molded news, insinuated news, and made news.

In 25 years of investigative reporting he had left a host of enemies in his wake. "The terrible price of telling the truth," he explained to David Susskind on late-night television. "I'm America's witness at large, David. The Diogenes of the Potomac." After his 1959 expose of TV's soap-opera scandals, a wave of angry mail had nearly swamped his office, but Ollinger survived the deluge. His twelve staff members called their K Street office "The House of Storm."

Over the years a dozen foes had thrown punches at him. A critic from San Francisco had tried to run him through with a sword. An unidentified woman from Albuquerque had mailed him a plastic bomb. A slight, soft-spoken hairdresser from Indianapolis had sprayed .25-caliber bullets in his direction. Each time he had escaped without serious injury.

But his enemies were everywhere. So were his paid informants and his electronic bugs. "An investigative reporter," *Time* quoted him as saying, "needs the eyes of Argus, the ears of Panasonic,

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and the cold playback capability of Memorex." He had many secret sources of information. "More secret sources than the Nile," his fourth wife Cleo was fond of burbling at Georgetown dinner parties.

Ollinger had just returned from a meeting in the basement of an abandoned warehouse in Bethesda, Maryland, where he had talked secretly with Vice-Presidential press secretary Wayne Davidson. Ollinger had given Davidson the code name of "Batman." A brash, spiteful fellow with narrow shoulders and bulging eyes, Davidson was trying to link Steven M. Arcato, the wealthy Hyattsville attorney, to a local Satanism ring, after having failed to wring Arcato dry in an extortion squeeze.

The phone in Ollinger's reception area jangled. Sally Pickerel, his secretary, reached for it, but the columnist grabbed it from under her darting fingers.

"Ollinger here."

An operator answered. "I have a collect call for Mr. Robert Ollinger from"—she paused for an instant, then finished the sentence flatly, with no change in her voice—"from Mr. Napoleon Bonaparte in Honotassa, New Mexico. Will you accept the charges?"

Ollinger had no source with the code name "Napoleon Bonaparte" and no regular contacts in Honotassa. His nearest secret source was "Chief Thundercloud" in Santa Fe. But he did have a policy of taking unexpected phone calls. He took them because one such call early in his career had led him to a small but newsworthy scandal in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

"Put the man on."

Ollinger nodded curtly to his secretary, retired to his soundproof inner office, and lifted the receiver.

The man from Honotassa spoke in a pleasant Western drawl. "*Merci, monsieur. Bonjour.*"

"Talk English," Ollinger snapped. "My French is terrible."

"Mine too," the man said. "I never could get the accent right. Corsica, you know. Douglas County. Cold, cold, cold up there, especially this time of year. A hundred and sixty miles from Pierre as the crow flies."

"What's on your mind, Emperor?"

A sigh. "Field Marshal Kutuzov. Moscow winters."

"That does it, Bony. So long." Ollinger started to hang up.

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"No, wait." Napoleon's voice rose imploringly from the earpiece. "Listen to me, Mr. Ollinger. Your life is in danger."

Ollinger grunted. "So what else is new?"

"I mean it. I'm not kidding. This Poindexter is bad news. I mean he's *really* bad news."

"Poindexter?—got that, Sally? Poindexter. Yes?"

"He's already killed Baker and Grant—"

"Spell it out, Corporal. No riddles. Baker. Grant. Who?"

"—Beckwith, Hindman. He shot Baker down right here in New Mexico. Over in Roswell. It was terrible. When I say bad news, Mr. Ollinger, I mean *bad* news."

"Come again?"

"The K-Bar-D murders. The big ones. The branding-iron jobs. Don't you read the newspapers?"

"I've got two assistants to do that."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding. I never kid. Okay, I've heard of the K-Bar-D murders. Vaguely. But fill me in."

"Four murders in two months. Frank Baker over in Roswell. He was a plumber, I think. Joseph Grant in St. Louis. Robert Beckwith—where? I forget. George Hindman out East. Pittsburgh. Bad news, eh?"

"I'll check it out."

"Check it out? There's no need to check it out. It's in all the papers. And I'm telling you, the kid's going to kill you too. He's going to kill Robert Ollinger somewhere, sometime."

"Why?"

"Why? You get to be a big-shot Washington columnist and that's all you know? You're *Robert Ollinger*. You're not Dick Brewer or J. H. Tunstall. Do you think I'm a pal of the Duke of Wellington? Do you think John Dillinger still likes the Lady in Red? You see what I mean?"

"No."

"Poindexter shot Hindman a week ago in Pittsburgh. Hindman. Pittsburgh. Get it? It means he's moving east. Toward you. And you're so well-known I just can't see him going through a dozen phone books to find some *other* Robert Ollinger. Can you?"

"This Poindexter—what's his first name?"

"I don't know. But be careful, Mr. Ollinger. I'm giving you fair warning. Don't take chances. Remember Waterloo. That was a bad day in *my* life, I'll tell you. If only Marshal Grouchy—"

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"I'll check it out, Bonaparte. Thanks for calling."

Ollinger lowered the receiver to its cradle, leaned back in his swivel chair, and studied the Mondrian canvases on his far wall. Their pure geometry, he thought, contrasted nicely with the formlessness and chaos of modern life. Madmen. Murderers. Scandals. Scoundrels. A soft-spoken Napoleon Bonaparte out in Honotassa, New Mexico, worried that Bob Ollinger, hard-nosed Washington columnist, might be gunned down by a kid named Poindexter. Crazy? Sure. Almost as crazy as some of the happenings on the Hill.

He leaned forward and punched a button on his desk. "Sally, ask our high-rise cage king to come in here. That means Bell."

Mort Bell, a former college basketball star, six-feet-four-inches, with sleepy brown eyes and a black handlebar mustache, had joined the Ollinger investigative team three months before, hired on the rebound from routine reporting. A motorcycle enthusiast, he craved excitement, the open road, the whiff of diesel oil. His work had offered nothing of the sort. For a couple of months after college he had idled away his time on the police beat of a Baltimore daily, a job he found as dreary as the drunk tank and as boring as the police blotter.

One rainy morning in November Bell had shouted, "I quit!" at precisely the instant his managing editor had screamed, "You're fired!" They sealed it with a fight in which Bell lost his Sigma Delta Chi key and two front teeth. Nothing daunted, he jumped on his Yamaha and barreled through the Harbor Tunnel, bound for glory.

"Mort," said Ollinger as Bell strolled into his office, "grab a seat. What's on the front burner?"

Bell dropped into a chrome-and-cowhide sofa and scowled. "Payoffs in the Jersey legislature," he said. Glory was still around the corner.

"Give it to Armstrong. Jersey's his bag—graft and corruption in Trenton—he's handled it for years. I've got a new job for you. A hot one. I want you to dig up everything you can on the K-Bar-D murders."

Bell looked startled. An embarrassed grin widened beneath the handlebars.

"As a matter of fact, Chief," he said, "I've been writing a five-thousand-word article on the K-Bar-D case for *Smashing True Detective*. As a free-lance."

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Ollinger stared hard at him, his cold eyes pitiless as a time clock.

"In my spare time," Bell added lamely.

"In your spare time," Ollinger echoed, lighting a perfecto and exhaling a cloud of smoke. "Sure. Well, at least you're in the right ballpark for once." He leaned forward. "What about these K-Bar-D murders?"

Mort Bell crossed his long legs and took a sip of coffee from the styrofoam cup he had brought in with him.

"It's short and simple, Chief. The killer, whoever he is, is as crazy as the Mad Hatter. A trigger-happy psychopath. He shoots his victims with an old-fashioned .41-caliber revolver, usually in their living rooms. Then he brands their foreheads—"

"Hold on, Mort. He does *what*?"

"So help me, he brands their foreheads with a branding iron. From the K-Bar-D Ranch. Just like out West, only he uses a hibachi to heat the branding iron. When he's finished, he leaves the hibachi and takes the branding iron with him."

Ollinger whistled. "Not exactly the man next door. Not your usual domestic squabble: a hasty wedding, bang-bang. Where's the K-Bar-D Ranch?"

"There isn't one. There never has been. It's his own private brand."

"Who are the victims? What are their names?"

"Let me think. They all have common names. Grant is one, I think—yes, Joseph Grant, a stockbroker. Let's see. There's a Beckwith. A Baker."

"Okay, Mort. That's the Mad Hatter I'm after. What's the link between the victims? What's the pattern? What's the motive? Why the K-Bar-D brand?"

"It's a four-star mystery, Chief. There's no motive. No robbery. No violence except the bullet hole and the brand. No sex angle. One man's been murdered in New Mexico, one in Missouri, one in Indiana, the latest one in Pennsylvania. Four altogether. And the victims don't have a thing in common. Nothing. They didn't all serve on the same jury, or fight in the same platoon in World War Two, or take the same plane from Dulles to O'Hare, or receive the same coded message from Hong Kong. It's as if the guy is killing names, not people."

"But why those particular names?"

"Nobody knows. Or nobody's talking. If the police have come up

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with any link between them, they haven't said so. And I couldn't find any."

"Do they expect the killer to try again?"

"Sure."

"Why?"

"I told you, he's nuts."

Ollinger adjusted his steel-rimmed aviator glasses, ran his fingers through a dark and expensive hairpiece. "The killer's name is Poindexter, Mort. And I think we'd better find him pronto. In time to prevent another man's murder. Maybe mine."

Bell studied his boss through sleepy eyes. "We're reporters, Chief. We're not private eyes. This is a job for the police, isn't it? Or the F.B.I.?"

"This is a job for you," Ollinger said evenly, pointing his finger for emphasis. "It's your assignment as of this minute. I want you to work on it night and day. No more moonlighting. I want you to run scared this time, Mort. I want you to find the K-Bar-D killer or else find yourself another job."

"You're kidding."

Ollinger never kidded. He made his ultimatums, carried them out, and ignored whatever human debris he created. "I never look back," he once informed Mike Wallace in a TV retrospective on his career.

Mort Bell accepted the assignment, aware that gumshoeing netted more than unemployment insurance. No man missing could be a greater menace than Robert Ollinger threatening. Bell headed for the privacy of his cubicle and the dubious solace of his telephone.

Concentrating once again on his Mondrians, Ollinger began putting together the next *Hot Line* column in his head. It concerned a prominent politician's wife suffocated in her Miami hospital bed by a nurse with anarchist leanings. "While the patient slept, death stole softly into Room 18—" the column began. Ollinger intended to make it poignant. "Tears that smear the newsprint," he often advised his staff, "grow cabbage that pays the rent."

Before the final line of *Capitol Hot Line* was fixed in his mind, Mort Bell burst back into Ollinger's office, bypassing Sally Pickerel like a Harley on a shunpike.

"How about that, Chief? An hour and ten minutes on the case and I've found out what K-Bar-D means."

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"Let's have it." Ollinger punched a button on his tape recorder.

Bell's voice hummed with excitement. "Well, a few days ago the police in St. Louis—that's where Grant was killed—turned up a cocktail waitress named—you're not going to believe this, Chief—Kay Bardee. Perfect, no? It must take a kook to catch a kook. Who would think of going through the local phone book to find a person named Kay Bardee? Sergeant Vickers of the St. Louis P.D., that's who. He did, and there she was. Kay Bardee, 317 Hunting's End Road. Sergeant Vickers' triumph."

"I doubt it."

"You're right. But the police checked into Miss Bardee like the Warren Commission checking into Lee Harvey Oswald. They learned so much about her private life that they've booked her on charges of petty larceny, loitering, possession of a controlled dangerous substance, and impairing the morals of a minor."

"But not on the K-Bar-D murders."

"No. She's innocent of those. She had no connection with the murders. She was loitering with her boy friend in Jefferson City at the time Grant was being killed in St. Louis."

Ollinger waved his hand in irritation. "So all you've really found out is that K-Bar-D doesn't mean Kay Bardee."

"No, there's more. During the Kay Bardee publicity a professor of American History at Dahlgren University wrote a letter to the St. Louis *Chronicle,* telling them that the cattle brand they'd been showing on the front page wasn't a K-Bar-D brand at all."

"What do you mean?"

"The bar in the K-Bar-D brand was a Roswell police lieutenant's mistake. Everybody else followed his lead. What was being called a bar is actually, in the heraldry of the range—that's what the professor called it—a sideways *I.* A 'Lazy *I.*' So the brand is K-Lazy I-D. K-I-D. Get it?"

"I'm beginning to. Back to work, Mort. Hunt with the hounds."

Bell left for his cubicle, and Ollinger, after handing Sally Pickerel the tape for transcription, began putting in a series of phone calls, picking up a brief liberal education in Western Americana. His first two calls went to the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. His last call went to the Melora Valley Sanitorium, near Honotassa, New Mexico. After some insistence on his honored status in American journalism he got through to an assistant director, Dr. Mervyn Keller. "Dr. Keller," Ollinger said, "do you have a Napoleon Bonaparte there?"

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The doctor chuckled. "You're in luck, Mr. Ollinger. We have two Napoleons. One is from Arizona, the other from South Dakota. They're splendid fellows, sharp as tacks. Most of the time they're as rational as we are. But they do have their one little delusion. And how they fight about that delusion—about who's the real Napoleon and who's the fake."

Dr. Keller cleared his throat as if to annul his chuckle and his commentary. In a businesslike voice he concluded, "We also have a Winston Churchill, a Madame Curie, and a Joan of Arc."

"Do you have a Billy the Kid?"

There was a telltale silence. "I'd rather not talk about the patients who have left us, Mr. Ollinger. I prefer to speak no evil of the departed. You realize that we are a private institution. Many of our patients have, or their families have, a great deal of money—enough money to hire psychiatrists, nurses, guards, companions, and the like. Sometimes we release patients who are still quite disturbed, knowing these patients will receive excellent care at home."

"In other words, you once had a Billy the Kid. You set him loose while he was still trying to figure out where you'd hidden his six-guns."

A sigh. "At various times in the past," the psychiatrist said, "we have had Jesse James, Annie Oakley, Billy the Kid, John Dillinger, and Judas Iscariot. Jesse James, I might add, is now a prominent dentist in Albuquerque. John Dillinger is an estate planner in Kansas City. There's no predicting how these things will turn out."

"Thank you, Doctor."

So that was the answer, the crux of the case. Billy the Kid, resurrected in the addled brain of a man named Poindexter, was roaming the countryside, reliving a legendary past, killing innocent plumbers, stockbrokers, and others who happened to have the same names as Billy the Kid's old victims. The branding iron was a bizarre touch, but one that gave the crimes a cachet.

Napoleon Bonaparte, the informant of the Honotassa Bonapartes, had been right. Poindexter was big news, bad news.

Ollinger dialed the number of Mort Bell's cubicle. No answer. He slammed down the receiver. If that lazy jock had left for the day. . .

At six o'clock, as dusk was settling over the city, Ollinger, according to custom, was switching from black coffee to straight

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Scotch, partly to unwind from the day, partly to escape the night.

He tried Bell's extension again. Still no answer.

He stalked across the room and threw open the door. Sally Pickerel, who worked the same exhausting hours as her boss, thrust a paperback book hastily into a top drawer. "What's up?"

"Where's Bell?"

"I don't know. He left the office about five hours ago. I asked him where he was going, but all he would tell me was that he was bound for glory."

"He's bound for the unemployment line," Ollinger grated, heading for Bell's cubicle.

The light had been dimmed for the night in the large room that held twelve pea-green cubicles topped by frosted glass. No one was there. To Ollinger the silence was offensive and oppressive. Offensive because he felt that at least one of his assistants should work through the night; Ollinger had provided a metal cot for the purpose, but it stood unused at the far end of the room. Oppressive because he knew his life really was in danger.

He walked toward Bell's cubicle near the cot. As he did so, he heard a slight sound behind him. Not usually a nervous man, he whirled at the noise and yelled, "Who's there?"

In the dim light he saw a tall figure approaching, a cowboy hat pulled low over his brow. The man wore a plaid shirt and blue levis. A gun glinted in his hand.

The figure approached without speaking, as Ollinger backed up to the cot, stood there, his legs trembling, his mind racing. He often carried a tear-gas pencil on the street, but never in the office.

As the figure swaggered closer, Ollinger caught sight of a handlebar mustache and—a grin.

"Hi, Chief," Mort Bell said. "In the immortal words of Wilt Chamberlain, 'Relax.' "

Ollinger exhaled a long breath that seemed to rattle a bit. "Get into my office," he growled.

Bell turned without replying and sauntered past Sally into the inner office. He flopped down on the cowhide sofa, lit a perfecto, pointed his finger at Ollinger, and said, "Chief, you're safe. Billy the Kid is in the hands of the F.B.I."

"You're kidding."

"I never kid. You gave me an assignment, I carried it out. I took Poindexter into custody myself."

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"How did you find him?"

"It took some time. About four hours on the phone, as a matter of fact. I started with the name you gave me: Poindexter. I also tried William Bonney, which was the Kid's real name. Four hours later, bingo. The jackpot. Alvin Poindexter, an eighteen-year-old kid with an Adam's apple the size of his big delusion, was in the Washington area, registered under the name of William Bonney.

"Registered where?"

"At the El Rancho Rio Motel in Arlington. I tried thirty or forty hotels and motels, asking for either Poindexter or Bonney, before I found him. He still had seven thousand dollars in his wallet when I picked him up. The Poindexters of Corsica, South Dakota, are very rich, you know."

"I didn't know. Did Poindexter have a gun?"

"A .41-caliber Double Action Colt with enough ammo to fight the Lincoln County War. Also a branding iron, five hibachis, and a spiral notebook with a list of names."

"My name was on the list?"

"It sure was, Chief. Right at the top. It seems you were once a deputy marshal in southern New Mexico. The Kid killed you back in April, 1881."

"How did you capture him?"

"By craft and low cunning."

Ollinger looked respectful. "That's the way to do it. Did you go to his motel?"

"About an hour ago. I'm about the right height and weight for the role." He paused.

"The role?"

Bell winked. "The role I had to play. Mort Bell, lawman. I've got a black handlebar mustache. But I had to change into these blue levis and a plaid shirt. Then I went out and bought a ten-gallon hat—"

"I get it!"

"—borrowed an antique .44 revolver from a friend of mine, and took off for the motel. I knocked on Bonney-Poindexter's door. When he opened it, I ambled in, leveled the .44 at him, and told him I was—"

"Sheriff Pat Garrett!"

"Right."

"Great Scott! And it worked?"

Bell puffed his perfecto coolly. "It worked. The kid was scared to

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death. He knew, he just *knew* I was going to gun him down. After all, I'd killed him once, back in 1881. He cried. He begged and pleaded. He offered me his money and his hibachis."

"Son of a gun," Ollinger muttered.

"Right on. I won his confidence by telling him we'd call him 'a youthful blue-eyed killer' in the column. Finally I talked him into coming with me. About ten minutes ago I dropped him off at the J. Edgar Hoover Building."

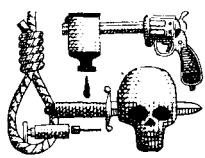
Ollinger slammed a congratulatory fist on his rosewood desk. "Good work, Mort. And to think I figured you for the office clinker. Using that Pat Garrett trick was an inspiration. Worthy of Bob Ollinger himself in his younger days."

Mort Bell grinned. "I'm glad I used somebody else's name, though. Two of the other men on Poindexter's list were William Morton of Syracuse and James Bell of Boston. I don't know whether I would have survived with my own name."

"You'd have survived, Mort. You've got class. You're still wet behind the ears, you've got no top-level sources, but you've got potential. Let's talk bonus."

Before they could settle on an amount, Sally Pickerel poked her head inside the office. She smiled at the sheriff and spoke briskly to the columnist. "There's a 'Captain Hook' on the line, Mr. Ollinger. Would you like to take the call?"

"I'll take it," Ollinger snapped. "But I already know what it's about." He pointed a triumphant finger at his junior assistant. "The Captain is my secret source in the F.B.I., Mort. He'll want to tell me they've solved the K-Bar-D murders."



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 451st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . .

The author, David Bradt, is twenty-five. He was born and raised in southern California, but for the past three years he and his wife Janice have been living in the state of Washington. He has a degree in journalism from California State U. in Fullerton. His first job after graduation was as "a shipping clerk for a gasoline and oil storage tank manufacturing firm" during the "gas shortage" when "the big oil companies were buying 10,000-gallon tanks as if the Alaska Pipeline had just been completed and there was nowhere to put the incoming oil. Makes one wonder." After that he worked as a warehouseman—until he was laid off.

His outdoor interests include skiing, camping, fishing, and backpacking. Otherwise he "keeps busy reading and shooting pool on a funky $50 used table with rolls that would befuddle Willie Mosconi."

With this background you might guess the type of crime story that Mr. Bradt would write. Easy to guess, isn't it? Would you expect a story of loneliness and love and the long arm of the law? . . .

A KIND OF MADNESS

by DAVID BRADT

Maybe it wasn't right, her Jim dead and buried only a year and all, to sit here by his grave in the clearing back of the house and fret over the Sheriff arresting Wayne Chandler today. But the glade was quiet and peaceful when the still summer days retreated before the warm dark nights, and Sarah seemed to always end up here when something was troubling her mind.

Just a couple months before she'd been leaning against this

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same sturdy little pine, letting her loneliness and her fears melt into the June night, when she'd first heard Wayne call. He'd ventured up the road, tired and looking for a bed and maybe a bite to eat, insisting he'd pay her husband or help with the morning chores for his night's keep.

When Sarah told him her Jim had passed on, Wayne flushed and wrung his hands together for no reason and said he'd be off now and was sorry to have bothered her. But the hired man hadn't shown for two days and she'd heard he was drinking his paycheck again, so she told Wayne she surely could use some honest work around the place as the chores were piling up faster than she could get to them.

She'd fed him supper that night, she remembered as she sat in the clearing watching the moon rise just above the treetops. And after supper she'd boiled up a pot of coffee and they got to conversing until before she knew it dawn spilled over the hills and the rooster was crowing. When she laughed at his jokes or near cried when he described some of the pretty places he'd seen, the lonely ache inside her disappeared for the first time in a year.

Recollecting the first evening with Wayne made her cry for what seemed the hundredth time today. She got to her feet and tried to think of the crops and the harvest coming up soon. But when she shut her eyes she saw Wayne just as plainly as if he were standing in front of her. She knew she couldn't visualize Jim so clearly any more without pulling out one of the photographs she'd hidden away in the bureau drawer shortly after Wayne had moved in. But she supposed what with time passing and a new man on her mind this was natural.

Then this morning, when Wayne was working out in the barn and she was scrubbing the last of the breakfast dishes, everything had gone bad again. Sheriff Tucker and his deputy, Charlie Weber, they'd come and taken him away.

Sarah opened her eyes. The moon was big and round and she wondered if Wayne could see it from the jailhouse. And she wondered crazy things, like if they'd fed him a proper supper and if he was thinking about her as much as she was thinking about him. Seemed this was a worse fit of loneliness than when Jim went and got killed in the fields.

The noise of a car bouncing up the rut-filled road broke the solemn tranquillity of the moment. Sarah sprinted from the clearing. Could be the Sheriff was bringing Wayne back. It was all a mis-

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take and now they'd forget it ever happened and return to things just as they were.

She raced around the corner of the house and saw the Sheriff's black and white jeep approaching. And it did seem that two people were riding in the front seat. Straining her eyes, wishing she could turn up the moon's brightness like a lamp, she waited nervously on the porch.

Her heart plummeted like a bird shot on the wing. It was Charlie Weber who rode next to the Sheriff. A flash of disgust went through her. She suspected Charlie was just as happy to see Wayne Chandler in jail as she knew he'd been when her Jim had died.

"Evening, Sarah," Sheriff Tucker called too loudly, braking to a halt in front of the porch. She watched the two men closely but did not acknowledge the greeting. Charlie Weber jumped out the far door and strode around the car. He looked at her the way he always did, real calculating and cold, like he was sizing her up in a way she didn't appreciate.

"Evening, Sarah," he said slowly, a strange half smile cracking his face. She dropped her gaze for an instant and when she raised her head again it was the Sheriff she watched.

"What do you want, Sheriff?"

"We got a few facts about Wayne Chandler I think you ought to know. I figured I best tell you right away and maybe it would ease your mind some." He glanced over at Charlie Weber before continuing. "This information came over the wire today. Just like we thought, Chandler's a wanted man. We've got enough on him to send him up for a right long stretch, it appears to me. It's all on paper, Sarah." He pulled a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket, stepped onto the porch, and handed it to her.

"It's all right there on the paper," Charlie Weber said from below. He struck a match and lit a cigarette. The acrid smell of the sulphur and the thick smoke he blew her way nearly turned Sarah's stomach. She snatched the paper from the Sheriff and tossed it onto the wooden planks of the porch.

"I don't need to read those lies. I know my Wayne."

The Sheriff shrugged and bent down to pick up the paper. "I'm just trying to make it easier for you."

Sure he was, she thought. Ever since her Jim died folks had tried their darnedest to make it easier for poor Sarah. Trouble was, their sympathy seemed to come not from their hearts, but

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from some sense of obligation, as if it was a duty they had to perform. Sarah knew the womenfolk didn't like her because she was young and pretty, and when she watched them as they brought their baskets of food and listened to their idle chatter, she thought she sensed in them a secret relish for the tragedy of others.

If the women weren't bad enough themselves, they sent subdued young men around after a proper mourning period, who sat quietly watching her and not sure how to act. Worse yet were the heartless fellows like Charlie Weber, who barely concealed their intentions when they came calling and saying they could make her forget all about her Jim.

Jim had been a good man, more decent than any of the folks who gathered in the clearing the day he was buried, standing uncomfortably under the hot sun in their dark suits and heavy dresses. Never had she regretted marrying him. And when he died there was an emptiness that all the visitors could no more fill than could the few farm animals she had kept.

Then Wayne had burst into her life and swept away her sorrow even that first night when they'd talked until dawn, opening to her an enchanting and joyous way of life she'd never experienced before.

Theirs was a love she never had dreamed possible. While her relationship with Jim had developed slowly, maturing only after marriage, steady and sure as the seasons, with Wayne it was as if a winter storm had exploded or spring rains were falling or the fall winds were blowing so hard you could hardly walk against them. A kind of madness she had never before felt. It was as if they were made of the same dreams and desires, sorrows and sadnesses. When he held her at night she could never be anything but the happiest woman on earth.

"Let me tell you somethin', Sarah," Charlie Weber drawled. "If that boy were free to go he'd hightail it to the stateline so fast a fellow wouldn't even see him go by. No way that joker'd come back to you after we've exposed him for what he is."

"He would too. I know Wayne. He don't have anything to be ashamed of."

Exasperated, the Sheriff shook his head. He peered down the road into the darkness and then spun quickly around toward Sarah. Too bad she'd gotten mixed up with Chandler. He felt sorry for her. She was a sweet good-looking woman, and if he

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could convince her of what a lowdown character Chandler was she'd be making one of the local boys a fine wife in no time. He approached her and placed his hands firmly on her shoulders.

"Listen, Sarah. Men like Wayne Chandler just prey on women like you. They have ways of finding out you collected that big policy when Jim died. They know you're gonna be lonely. Chandler would talk you out of every cent you own and the farm too, give him half a chance. Now why in the devil can't you understand that?"

Her arms shot up from her sides and slapped Sheriff Tucker's hands off her shoulders. "Then why didn't he try?" she said, wheeling around and stalking to the far end of the porch. From this side of the house you could see around the corner just enough to view where Jim was buried. She stood with her arms crossed and her back to the men, and tried to catch the peaceful feeling a quiet night in the clearing brought her. She felt the rough boards under her bare feet. A wisp of warm wind, sluggish as the river in late summer, blew through her dress.

The Sheriff eyed her apprehensively, then sighed loudly and walked down the steps to the jeep. "Just thought you ought to know, Sarah," he said. "Sorry you had to find out this way. Let's go, Charlie."

She heard the car start and the engine rumble when the Sheriff gunned it a couple times, and then the crackle of the gravel crunching under the tires as the jeep pulled away. Suddenly, desperately, she bolted down the steps, ran across the sharp gravel, and dashed down the dusty road.

"Wait!" she cried.

The jeep halted, but she ran until she reached Sheriff Tucker's open window.

"What is it, Sarah?"

"Can you take me to see him? Right now?"

"What for?"

"I've got to tell him I'll wait. He needs me now. I know it."

"Needs a good lawyer, is what he needs," Charlie Weber laughed from the far side of the jeep.

"Charlie's right," Sheriff Tucker said. "And dammit, girl, I spelled it out for you plain as day. Wayne Chandler was after your money. I can't make it any clearer than that."

Sarah didn't answer, but stared at the Sheriff so intently that he turned his head and studied the dashboard, as if some wisdom

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were lurking in its gauges. "Tomorrow morning," he said finally. "Come down tomorrow morning. By then we'll probably have a rap sheet on this guy long enough to paper your bedroom walls with."

"You gonna tell her what he said?" Charlie Weber asked the Sheriff.

The Sheriff's head snapped to the side as if it had been slapped. "You tell her since you had to go and bring it up," he snarled.

Charlie leaned low so he could see Sarah through the window. "You want to hear somethin' kind of humorous considering all we've told you, Sarah? That boy wanted us to let you know that he loves you. Imagine him saying he loves you." He laughed harshly and sat up straight as soon as he saw the pain in her eyes. "Let's get goin', Sheriff."

Sheriff Tucker shifted into first gear and the jeep lurched down the road. Standing still as a tree on a near-windless night, Sarah watched until the red taillights vanished in the distance. The moon wrapped her in its somber light and made her tears glisten faintly in the night.

Early the next morning Sarah awoke from an uneasy sleep. She grabbed the cotton dress off the foot of the bed and stepped through the waning darkness to the bathroom, where she switched on the lamp. Every movement she made, it seemed, she'd rehearsed during the restless night. She bathed and pulled her dress on and brushed her hair until it sparkled like rich golden grain when the sun washes over it at dawn. Each stroke with her brush seemed to add more luster.

Looking serious in the mirror, she combed her bangs just the way Wayne liked them, pulled to one side and drooping close over her eye. What a joy it would be to see him. If she could just hold him for a minute, hear his whisper in her ear, then everything would be fine again.

Already the day was warm, the air heavy, she noticed as she hurried down the eroded driveway to the dirt county road, and then, after a mile or so, onto the paved highway to town. She was regretting that she hadn't listened to Jim and learned to drive the truck, when she heard an approaching car behind her. She twirled around and waved. An old pickup loaded with produce for the town market skidded to a halt on the dusty shoulder.

She climbed in unhesitatingly and listened as well as her concentration allowed while the driver complained of the dry weather

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and how it was going to ruin his season unless a bit of rain fell soon. He was still carrying on when he let her off at the jailhouse, and never did inquire as to what business she had there.

She ran up the concrete walkway and flew expectantly through the door, as if she thought Wayne would be standing there all set to go free.

The Sheriff and Charlie Weber, though, were alone in the office, and she was disappointed to discover that the cells weren't visible except through a small window on a massive gray door. The Sheriff mumbled a greeting and turned away. Charlie, sitting with his feet propped on his desk, smiled, but didn't rise.

"Can I see him now?" she asked breathlessly.

The Sheriff spoke, and she could barely hear him. "That's not possible."

"But you said I could," she pleaded. "I have to!"

He didn't answer right away, and when he started to speak no words followed the first few.

"Sheriff seems a bit tongue-tied," Charlie Weber said. "Don't know why. Every jail has to deal with an escapee now and then."

Sheriff Tucker glanced forlornly at his deputy, breathed deeply, then walked up to Sarah. She'd gone pale and her hands were trembling. "Wayne Chandler escaped last night, Sarah," he said rapidly. "Don't know how, but a trustee or somebody got hold of the office key. We usually keep it pretty well hidden. We finally caught up with him and when we called and he didn't stop we had to open fire."

Sarah stood still as the words settled into her mind, looking into his face but not really seeing it. Suddenly she sprang toward Charlie Weber.

"You killed him!" she screamed. "*You* killed him!"

Charlie fended off her small fists and the Sheriff grabbed her shoulders and twisted her around. "I did," he whispered, eyes inches from her own. "I had to."

Her body went limp and the Sheriff tightened his grip on her, fearing she would fall if he let go. Then she slowly stiffened, as if coming back to life. Without looking at either man she walked to the door. "I'm sorry," the Sheriff said.

She opened the door and stepped outside. "What surprised me," she heard Charlie Weber say purposefully loud enough for her to hear before she shut the door, "was where we caught up to him. Hell, I would've sworn he'd go for the stateline. But you had to

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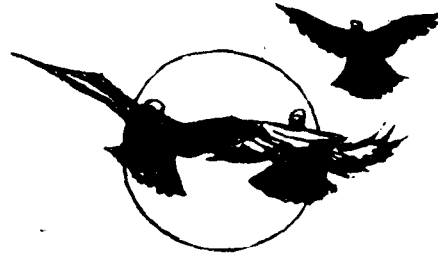
shoot him, Sheriff. He didn't give you a choice. No tellin' what he had in mind for poor Sarah if he'd actually made it to her place, like he was tryin'."

But the Sheriff was thinking about the key. There was no sure way of knowing who got it to Chandler. He looked at Charlie sitting with his feet on the desk and smiling like he hadn't really seen a man die last night. There was no sure way of knowing.

Sarah closed the door. The street glared brightly in the morning sun. But it was still too early for people to be up and about much, and the only sound she heard was the whisper of a loneliness like she had never known before.



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 452nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . an odd story, with disturbing undertones . . .

The author, David Lensner, is thirty-one years old, married, and earns his living as a computer scientist; his wife Diane is an elementary-school teacher. Since coming to southern California, Mr. Lensner has been studying fiction-writing with the UCLA Writers Program. Mr. and Mrs. Lensner are fond of snow skiing and tennis, and at home Mr. Lensner likes to play Beethoven and Chopin on the piano.

Mr. Lensner's approach to plot is, as you will see, offbeat, and we hope he will continue to write for EQMM in this vein . . .

MAN ON A CHESSBOARD

by DAVID LENSNER

"My God, look at that painting!" Peter Andrews exclaimed.

"Which painting?" his companion asked.

"That one up there," Andrews said excitedly. He pointed to a particular painting on the museum wall. "Now there's an artist who has something to say."

Julian Gonzales, the man with Andrews, looked at the painting for a few moments. "That says something?" he asked indifferently.

"Of course," Andrews replied. "Don't you see?" Andrews studied the painting again, absorbing the impact which only he appeared to be feeling. The painting showed a desert scene, with a giant black and white chessboard resting on top of the yellow sand dunes. An old man in tattered rags was crawling across the center of the chessboard. His face was twisted with agony and his arms were reaching upward in a plea for help.

Up in the sky above the desert stood a grotesque skeleton,

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dressed in a hooded robe and carrying a scythe. The skeleton was peering out of his eyeless sockets at the world below him, watching the man on the chessboard with a leering, mocking smile.

"I suppose it *is* a little unusual," Gonzales said, "but I don't see anything special about it."

"But the symbolism—" Andrews insisted.

Andrews was a professor of philosophy at Slaterton College. He was a short quiet man in his late fifties with graying hair and round metal-rimmed glasses. Close to retirement, he considered his career a dismal failure. He had produced no major research papers in any area of philosophy, and he felt that his colleagues looked down on him for having brought no academic recognition to Slaterton in over three decades.

Gonzales, one of his colleagues, was Andrews' opposite in every conceivable way. Andrews resented the addition to the faculty of this flamboyant South American, a man much younger than himself who was already becoming a spokesman for avant-garde intellectualism. As far as Andrews knew, Gonzales was unaware of this hostility. He had invited Andrews to visit the campus art museum with him before the start of a department seminar, and Andrews had reluctantly accepted.

"Chess is a game," Andrews explained, "so the chessboard stands for the game of life. The man on the chessboard represents the human race. The two together in the desert depict the difficulties man has with life on earth."

"Difficulties?" Gonzales asked. "What kind?"

"That's not important," Andrews said with a trace of irritation in his voice. "The painting shows man looking up to the sky—to the heavens—for help."

"What's that creature in the sky doing there?" Gonzales asked. "He doesn't look as if he belongs in heaven."

"He is Death," Andrews said reverently, "and he is watching the progress of man on earth."

Gonzales furrowed his brow and looked back and forth between the painting and Andrews. "I think you just lost me," he said.

"No matter," Andrews snapped, the tone of his voice implying that the conversation had ended. There was no point in going further; Gonzales would never understand. "Come on, we don't want to be late for the seminar."

As they left the museum Andrews reflected on the one aspect of the painting's meaning that he had not told Gonzales. The figure

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of Death in the sky represented to him the spirits of people who had once lived on earth and had died. The man on the chessboard, in reaching up to this figure, was asking for help from the spirit world.

Andrews felt a certain kinship with the man on the chessboard. For several months he had also been attempting to make contact with the spirit world, using the technique of automatic writing. So far his attempts had failed. But after seeing this painting he was sure that his next attempt would succeed. That was the unexplainable feeling the painting had given him.

Throughout the seminar that afternoon Andrews' mind was preoccupied with thoughts of automatic writing. He had first learned of this unusual form of communication with the spirit world from a magazine article. After reading the article he had been instinctively drawn to automatic writing as a feat he was sure he could accomplish. He had to try something to salvage his career. He resented all the attention Gonzales was receiving.

Even though psychic phenomena were not strictly within the limits of classical philosophy, the two were nonetheless related theologically. If he could indeed make contact with the spirit world and provide convincing evidence of the existence of life after death, he could establish a reputation for himself before it was too late.

Andrews hurried home after the seminar, bustling with anticipation over his next attempt at automatic writing. He cleared everything off the desk in his study, set his typewriter in place, and sat down in his chair. He had been through these ritualistic preparations many times before, but with the painting still in his mind he now felt a renewed confidence.

He placed his hands on the desk, on both sides of his typewriter, and closed his eyes. After several minutes of meditation he felt he was properly prepared. Without opening his eyes he lifted his hands and placed them on the typewriter keyboard.

He waited motionless for several minutes, anticipating that his fingers would move involuntarily over the keys. As in his previous attempts, however, nothing happened. He tried to increase his concentration, to elevate his receptivity. Still nothing happened.

Then all of a sudden his fingers began flying over the keyboard, typing out letter after letter in a perfectly uniform rhythm. When his hands stopped moving, Andrews opened his eyes and squinted through his glasses at what had been written:

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We have been waiting for you to reach us. There are several of us here who have wanted an opportunity to communicate with the people of your world.

Andrews was spellbound. He had finally made contact with the spirit world; he had succeeded at automatic writing. A soul other than his own had used his hands to type on his typewriter. It was an eerie feeling, having his fingers used like puppets. But it was also an exciting, almost electric feeling.

Quickly he reread the message and wondered to himself why the plural pronoun "we" had been used. And as he wondered his hands again began moving over the keyboard, quickly typing another message on the paper. His eyes open this time, Andrews watched the message appear before him:

There are several of us here who want to communicate, but only one of us at a time controls the typing. You never knew any of us when we were alive. Now that we are on this side there are some things we can see about the future of the world that we want to share.

Andrews sat dumfounded as he read the message. He had made contact with not one but several souls. Whichever one was controlling his hands had read his mind and typed an answer to his thoughts. And since the messages did not originate in his mind, Andrews himself did not know what his hands were typing until he read the message on the paper. That was the most incredible part of it.

He formed another question in his mind. What specifically did they want to say to him? Again his fingers began typing an answer:

On this side we can see future events before they actually occur. We think the people of your world would benefit by knowing what is to come. We want to dictate an almanac covering the next fifty years, and we want you to pass the almanac on to the rest of the world.

Andrews read the typed message several times. His mind was swimming in a sea of complexities. Suddenly his fingers began typing still another message. He watched it appear on the page:

That is all for now. We will continue the communication tomorrow evening at this same time.

Peter Andrews' hands seemed to go limp after they had finished typing those last words, and he thought he could feel a sudden stillness in the room as though the faint hum of a distant electric

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motor had suddenly ceased. He sat back and thought over what had happened. These spirits actually wanted him to receive their almanac of future events, and then he was to be their messenger to the rest of the world. The painting had told him something like this would happen, but he was not prepared for the awesome feeling that would accompany it.

Andrews spent the remainder of the evening evaluating how his career would change. This almanac was even more than he had hoped for. It would bring him recognition from all over the country, from all over the world. He decided he would wait until the book had been dictated to him in its entirety before presenting it to his colleagues. He would also make a contract with a publishing house for international distribution.

But as he contemplated his success he realized that his colleagues in the philosophy department were going to present a serious problem. They would not accept his claim of contact with the spirit world without irrefutable proof. The word of one aging college professor would not be sufficient. They would say he had invented the whole thing, or worse, that he had been hallucinating.

The next day in his campus office he was rereading the magazine article which had first brought his attention to automatic writing when Julian Gonzales dropped in.

"Say, Pete," Gonzales said. "I've been thinking about that painting we saw yesterday—the one with the skeleton in the sky. Remember?"

"Yes, what of it?" Andrews asked curtly.

"You said the skeleton was Death and the guy in the desert was asking him for help getting through life. I don't think that's it. I think the guy in the desert is asking Death to put him out of his misery; he wants to die. It makes more sense that way."

Andrews looked up from his desk. "Yes, I suppose you're right," he said absent-mindedly. He had no intention of debating the painting with anyone right now. If agreeing with Gonzales would get rid of him, then so be it.

"That's the correct interpretation, I'm sure," Gonzales said, nodding his head. "Say, I just got this new journal—"

"Sorry," Andrews interrupted, "but I've got too much work to do right now." Gonzales, looking surprised, shrugged and left the office.

Andrews returned to the magazine article. He had to find a way

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to prove that his contact of the day before had been genuine. Otherwise he could just hear Gonzales leading the opposition against him, reducing his arguments to sheer absurdity in front of the entire faculty.

As Andrews continued reading he hit on a way to obtain the needed proof. It would take the form of a question-and-answer session. If indeed the spirit messages were to be accepted as genuine, they would have to contain information which Andrews himself never could have known. He would start out asking the spirits questions about, say, higher mathematics. But then for the ultimate proof he would ask them to trace back the ancestry of each faculty member of the philosophy department for two hundred years.

Yes, that would do it, he thought to himself. He set the article down and began to feel even more confident about the forthcoming changes in his career. He could never have learned about all those family backgrounds from any other source, especially that of Gonzales' family in South America. They'd have to believe him then. His almanac would be the talk of the campus, of the world.

That evening Andrews was back at his typewriter at the prescribed time. After the same preparations he placed his hands over the keyboard again. And again his fingers began to move rapidly over the keys as a message was typed by a force that came from outside the body. Andrews watched the message appear on the paper:

We are glad you have returned this evening. We will start the almanac by dealing first with the events of the next ten years.

Andrews read the message a second time. Yes, he'd get to that almanac in a few minutes, but first there was the matter of the proof he needed. Even though he wasn't going to tell anyone about the almanac until it was complete, he wanted the proof now to be sure he had it. He thought to himself what facts he should ask the spirits to produce first. Again his fingers began typing a message on the paper. Andrews watched it appear:

We see that you are looking for some sort of proof that we are who we say we are. It bothers us that you suddenly question our existence.

I have to, Andrews thought to himself; if I don't, the others to whom I present the almanac will make a mockery of me. His hands typed another message in response to his thought:

The almanac we will dictate is all the proof you will need. When

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people see the events in it come true in the next year or two, they will believe.

Andrews read the message and started to become agitated. He couldn't wait a year or two to see the events of the almanac come true. He needed his proof now. Besides, the magazine articles said that a contacted spirit would usually accept a challenge to prove its genuineness.

Suddenly his fingers began typing yet another message on the paper:

When you made contact with us we thought you would accept us without question. We are interested only in presenting facts to the world which people must be allowed to accept at their own leisurely pace. We are not interested in your petty academic jealousies. If you persist in your sudden skepticism we shall find someone else to receive our almanac.

The almanac. Andrews wanted to get on with the almanac, but surely they would give him just one statement to offer as immediate proof to Gonzales and the others.

"What are the names and dates of birth of Julian Gonzales' grandparents?" Andrews suddenly shouted out loud in his empty room.

Immediately his hands went limp at the keyboard, and again the room seemed suddenly quieter than it had been a minute ago.

"No!" Andrews shouted. "Come back!" He forced his fingers down on the typewriter in an attempt to make more words appear on the paper, but the keys only jammed together. "Please . . ." he said, his voice beginning to crack.

Slowly, pitifully, Peter Andrews pulled his hands away from the keyboard. He stared open-mouthed at the typewriter as the horror of what had happened came over him. The spirits had left him; his doubts had driven them away. There would be no more messages, now or ever. Everything he had wanted had been literally at the tips of his fingers, but now because he had been too impatient his last chance for professional recognition was gone. Andrews slumped back into his chair, took off his glasses, and quietly began to cry.

The next day he canceled his morning classes and returned to the art museum. He felt drawn to that painting which had first affected him so mysteriously. It had given him a message once and he thought it might give him another one now.

He found the painting hanging in the same place. The old man

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on the chessboard was still struggling to get through the game of life, Andrews thought as he gazed searchingly at the painting. Andrews felt even closer to the man on the chessboard than he had two days earlier.

But there was something different about that grotesque skeleton, the figure which to Andrews represented Death. It was in the eyes. Actually the skeleton had no eyes, only empty black sockets, so it was impossible to tell where the skeleton was really looking.

Two days ago Andrews had thought the skeleton was watching the man on the chessboard. Of course the painting couldn't have changed, but now it appeared as though this figure of Death was aiming his mocking, beckoning smile directly at Andrews.

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a NEW Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Mr. Leonard Strang, the little old gnome of a science teacher at Aldershot High School, is challenged to "hypothesize, syllogize, organize, deduce, induce, infer, and refer" in the solving of an unsolved murder case—in a phrase, to apply theory to reality . . . A baffling howdunit with a murder method that, we confess, stumped us—yet every clue necessary to deduce the solution is fairly given . . .

MR. STRANG ACCEPTS A CHALLENGE

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

MONDAY: THE CHALLENGE The 29 students in Mr. Strang's classroom gravely considered the two sentences scrawled across the freshly washed blackboard:

All A's are C's.
All B's are C's.

"The apparent conclusion—that all A's are B's—does have a certain allure, a kind of appealing logic."

Mr. Strang blinked myopically, his wrinkled face resembling that of a good-natured troll. Then he whirled, and his chalk drew a large screeching X through both sentences.

"Of course," he snapped, "it's also dead wrong. Its error can easily be verified by substituting 'teenager' for A, 'ostrich' for B, and 'two-legged' for C in the original premises. Thus, all teenagers are two-legged, all ostriches are two-legged, and therefore all teenagers are ostriches. I doubt you'd accept that conclusion."

"I dunno," guffawed a voice from the rear of the room. "Melvin's a teenager, and he looks like an ostrich."

Laughter, in which Mr. Strang joined. The student's comment

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hadn't been spiteful, simply an attempt to inject humor into a period of intense mental activity.

Mr. Strang's elective class in Logic and Scientific Method was one of the most popular courses in Aldershot High School. It was also one of the most difficult in which to enroll. Those students finally accepted—invariably seniors—had risen to the top of the academic ranks like cream in fresh milk. With these students, a teacher could pull out all the stops, being not so much an instructor as a participant in a free give-and-take of theories and ideas.

The politeness of the members of the class was tempered by their skepticism. They were willing to weigh and consider the most heretical hypotheses, mercilessly rejecting what they believed to be sham, hypocrisy, or incompetence. After each period Mr. Strang felt exhausted, yet exhilarated—somewhat like a runner who has just broken the four-minute mile. In teachers' heaven all classes would be like this one.

"Let us, then, consider the logical fallacy of undistributed middle," he went on. He drew a large circle on the blackboard with two smaller circles like staring eyes inside it. "If the large circle represents category C, and the smaller ones are A and B—"

He paused. In the far corner of the room three students had their heads together and were whispering earnestly. "We seem to have a rump session meeting over there," said the teacher. "Mr. Cornish, Miss Doyle, Mr. Lockley—what is it?"

There was a moment of embarrassed silence. "I yield to the gentleman in the maroon sweater," Mr. Strang said. "What's going on, Jerry?"

Jerome Lockley was tall, black, and beautiful. As he slowly uncoiled from his seat it seemed as if he wouldn't stop until his head hit the ceiling. Looking down from a height of over six and a half feet, he bestowed a sly grin on the old science teacher.

"Well, Mr. Strang," Jerry began. "You understand we all dig the way you teach this class. I mean, you keep us hopping, but it's kind of fun. Like basketball drills. And you're a right guy personally. If somebody gets in a little trouble, you try to help out instead of just dropping the dime on him. So I wouldn't want you to take anything I say the wrong way."

"Take what the wrong way?" asked the teacher.

"Since we've been in this class we've hypothesized, syllogized, and organized. We've deduced, induced, inferred, and referred. Right?"

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"Right, Jerry. That's what the class is all about."

"Yeah, but the first day you told us that all this logic stuff would help us in the real world." He jerked a thumb toward the window. "Out there, where it's all at. But so far all we've seen are little X's that are all Y's, and stuff about ostriches and diagrams like that one on the board."

"But there's still nearly seven weeks to go—"

Jerry shook his head. "Not good enough, Mr. Strang." He pointed toward the boy and girl with whom he had been whispering. "Richie and Alice and me, we'd like to know right now if what we've been learning is really gonna help us, or are we just spinning our wheels in here. How about it? Did you mean what you said that first day, or were you just jiving us?"

"The last quarter of the semester is devoted to practical applications. But until you've learned the basic theories—"

"Right on, Mr. Strang. We dig that. But *you* know all those theories, don't you? I mean you could put 'em to use if you had to?"

"I hope so, Jerry. Although I must say that often emotion tends to—"

"Okay, Mr. Strang. Then prove it. Prove this logic of yours really works."

Mr. Strang chuckled, but in his mind there was a twinge of foreboding. "And just what did you have in mind?"

The others in the class looked up expectantly at the tall boy. Jerry thrust his head forward, daring the old teacher.

"We want you to figure out how Simon Winkler was wasted."

Mr. Strang reacted as if a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him. For long seconds he gazed at Jerry, speechless. "But that happened last summer," he said finally. "And even the police haven't been able to—I mean, there's no evidence really, that he was—uh—'wasted.' I assume you mean murdered?"

Jerry shrugged. "Come on, man. Them two ladies was standing right there, weren't they? And the priest. As for the fuzz, what do they know? They never took this class, did they?"

In a daze Mr. Strang shook his head. In the far corner Richie Cornish tugged at Jerry's sweater. "Sit down. He's not gonna try it."

"Sure he will!" argued Jerry. "Mr. Strang's my main man. And he'll figure it out too."

"Half a dollar?"

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"It's a bet."

Jerry turned back to the teacher. "Now you got this deduction scam down pat. And it's not like you've got no facts to go on. That case was on the front page in all the papers for weeks, and we all know you got a few connections with the local cops."

"But I can't just barge in and reopen a police investigation that—"

Jerry cocked his head to one side. "You can't, Mr. Strang?" he asked cynically. "Or you won't?"

So there it was. The gauntlet had been flung down, the challenge had been hurled. All 29 students waited for Mr. Strang's answer. The old teacher took a deep breath and then sat on his high stool, a foolish grin on his face.

"Very well, Jerry," he said slowly. "I don't guarantee any results, but I can try."

"Right on, man!" Jerry extended an arm rigidly, his fist clenched.

As the bell rang, the students left, the sound of their excited whisperings buzzing in the old teacher's ears. He slumped over the demonstration table, cradling his head in his hands.

"Vorticella!" he said harshly. "Leonard Strang, you are an old fool!"

TUESDAY: THE CASE Detective Sergeant Paul Roberts stood at the front of the classroom, looking about warily. The kids had been decent enough so far, but who could tell what they might be plotting? Who in hell ever knew what was going on inside kids' heads these days?

The only reason he was here was because he hadn't been alert enough to think of a plausible excuse when Mr. Strang had called him yesterday evening to ask him to come to the classroom and discuss the Winkler case. Oh, sure, he did owe the old teacher a favor—many of them, in fact. But standing here in front of this group of sharp-eyed youngsters . . . Roberts envied Mr. Strang his classroom cool.

The old boy had done his homework right enough. There was Father Raymond Penn over in the corner, the case's only unbiased witness. The young cleric's unkempt hair and bushy beard made him look more like a hippie than a priest, in spite of the black suit and collar. Roberts was glad he'd stopped by the precinct's records section to get the still-open file on the Winkler case. It

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wouldn't do to annoy Mr. Strang by coming in unprepared. He cleared his throat loudly.

"Last July twenty-first," he began, "over in the Bay Ridge section of Aldershot, Simon Winkler died. The cause of death was a blow on the head—a fantastically powerful blow, since not only was the skull shattered, but two of the cervical vertebrae were crushed.

"Now Simon's aunts, Agnes and Lucille Winkler, were within a few feet of him when he died. Furthermore, they both had every reason to want him dead. And yet it's impossible that either of them struck him down. The police even investigated the possibility that the whole thing was an accident. But that was just as impossible. You see, we not only can't find out how the blow was landed, but also, whatever object struck Simon Winkler seems to have disappeared."

The students leaned forward like bloodhounds on the scent. "I don't have to worry about withholding information," the detective went on, "because there's nothing to withhold. By the time we're through here today, you'll know as much about the case as I do, and I was the man in charge of it. But the police are really stumped by this one. I guess the newspapers are too. All over the state they headlined it *The Weird Winkler Death.*"

"That's all right," Jerry Lockley drawled. "Mr. Strang'll figure out what really happened, with logic and all that jazz."

Roberts made a wry grin. "Just a word of warning," he said. "Although Lucille Winkler died last month of a stroke at the age of eighty, her older sister Agnes—an invalid in a wheelchair—is still alive, in a nursing home. So no rash accusations, okay? The laws concerning slander and defamation of character apply here just as well as anywhere else."

"Paul," said Mr. Strang ingenuously. "We merely intend to examine the evidence and see where it leads."

"Oh, sure, Mr. Strang. Just like you always do." A loud guffaw from the rear, and Roberts turned back to the class. "I'll just start things off by saying that at the time Simon Winkler came to call on his aunts, he was in the process of trying to take their house away from them by some kind of sharp legal ploy. The two old women hated his guts. They made no bones during the entire investigation about how much they despised their nephew. So Simon Winkler's visit to his aunts was hardly a social call."

He motioned to the priest. "Now I'd like to introduce the man

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who was actually present in the house at the time of Simon Winkler's death. Want to step up here, Father Penn, please?"

Father Raymond Penn came to the front of the classroom, where he used a finger to hook the white collar tab out of his shirt and undo the top button. To most of the boys the young priest seemed like a "right buy"; many of the girls found him adorable. He jammed his hands into his pants pockets and looked out at the class as if puzzled and bewildered by the human condition.

"By the time Lucille Winkler got in touch with me, Simon had already phoned her several times," he began. "Lucille had put him off with one excuse or another, but when it became clear that eventually she'd have to see him about who really owned the house, she set a date and asked me to be there. She wanted a witness present, you see.

"When I arrived at the Winkler house that afternoon, the weather was about as wet as it could be. Rain had been pouring down for the past few days and nights, and the weatherman had predicted more of the same. I banged the knocker on the front door and heard Lucille fumbling with the lock, but by the time it opened, my hat was just a mass of soaked cloth.

"Lucille took my hat and raincoat to dry them off at the stove in the kitchen. Since she also had to tend to Agnes in the wheelchair, she left me alone in the living room for quite some time."

He shrugged. "Matter of fact, I read three chapters in a book on fishing that was on the coffee table. I was just deciding whether I'd spent my next vacation catching bass in Canada or fishing for blue marlin off Mexico when she came back, wheeling Agnes in front of her. Gone about half an hour, I'd say."

Roberts looked significantly at Mr. Strang. Puckishly the teacher wiggled his fingers.

"We chatted for a while," Penn went on. "Mostly about the weather. Lucille prattled on a lot about spending most of the previous dry week dragging the lawn sprinklers around that big back yard of theirs, and now here they had so much water it was like living under a faucet.

"Finally Agnes looked out the window. 'I think Simon has arrived, Lucille,' she said. 'We must have some tea.'

"Outside, Simon Winkler was getting out of a cab. From what I could see, he was about fifty or fifty-five years old."

"Fifty-four," interrupted Roberts.

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The priest nodded. "But then I glanced back and noticed Lucille," he went on. "She was giving her sister the oddest look. Then she said, 'I'll put the water on.' She went out to the kitchen, but she was only gone for a minute or so."

Penn took a deep breath, and his eyes grew wide. "Now we come to the part the newspapers called weird. Me, I say it's downright eerie. You see, just as Lucille came back, there was a loud knocking at the front door, and Simon Winkler was shouting through it for someone to hurry and open up. 'Soaked to the skin!' I heard him yell. I felt sorry for him because I'd been through the same thing just an hour before. Lucille was fumbling with the bolt—she had arthritis in both hands—and I was wishing there were a window in the door so I could at least make a sign to him that we were opening the door as fast as we could, when"—the priest's voice grew low and sonorous—"when there was the sound of a dull thump from outside. That was followed by another sound—like something heavy sliding down the length of the door."

The students looked at him in rapt silence. This was what they had been waiting for.

"Seconds later we got the door open. And the rain poured in on us, because something was propping open the outer storm door." Penn pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"The thing holding open the storm door," he continued, "was the body of Simon Winkler. He was lying on the front stoop with blood gushing from his head. There were some gardening implements on the stoop—a bushel basket and some other things—and the blood had stained them all red, even in the rain. I was numb. Didn't know what to think or do. Finally I felt for a pulse. There was none. Winkler was dead."

A pencil falling to the floor sounded like a cannon shot in the classroom.

"Well," said Penn, "I tried to get the women back into the house. But they just stood in the doorway, staring at the body. Finally I told Lucille to go inside and call the police. Agnes and I remained in the doorway looking down at the body. The rain was coming in, but it seemed almost obscene just to leave the body there without anyone—I mean—"

He swallowed loudly, mopped at his face with the handkerchief, and sagged into a chair.

"What hit him?" asked Richie Cornish.

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Roberts got to his feet. "That's what we'd like to know too, young fella," he said. "It was at this point the police entered the case. The first patrol car that pulled up found Father Penn and Agnes Winkler looking down at the body at the doorway. A sheet was put around the body and the sheet immediately soaked through with rain and blood."

Roberts drew out a report form from the file folder he was holding and consulted it, speaking in a low voice. "I arrived on the scene at four thirty-five p.m. We ran a grease pencil outline of the body on the stoop and then had the body taken to the morgue. By that time the door was closed again, but before knocking I looked around a little. There, on one side of the stoop, was a bushel basket with a handful of weeds in it, and a metal sprinkling can lying on its side. On the other side of the stoop was a shiny new pair of grass shears and a little trowel. And that was all."

The detective's expression was grim, and he stared almost belligerently at the class. "Each of those things weighed a pound or two at most," he snapped. "Sure, some of 'em could give a man a headache or even knock him out if he was hit with enough force. And the grass shears would have made a perfect stabbing weapon, except that Winkler wasn't stabbed. His skull was crushed like an eggshell. And dammit—excuse me, Mr. Strang—there just was nothing around heavy enough to do it. We checked the stoop and walk for loose cement or to see whether a part of the wrought-iron railing might have been pulled away. Nothing."

He spread his hands. "There you have it. Oh, sure, we went inside and questioned Lucille, Agnes, and Father Penn. And we got the same story you heard just now. I even had the house searched. Neat as a pin, everything in its place. And absolutely no indication that someone besides the two women might have been living there, or hiding there, who could have done it.

"And now," he said, "let's take a look at the scene of the crime." The detective nodded at two boys at the rear of the room. One lowered the window shades and the other pressed the switch of a slide projector. A shaft of light lanced across the room, and on the screen at the front appeared a picture of an incredibly ugly house surrounded by what seemed to be acres of badly kept lawns and gardens.

"The Winkler house. It's off by itself on a private lane. Hipped roof, with three gables evenly spaced out along its upper section, well back from the eaves. Front door in the center, with a window

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on either side of it. Two more windows on the second floor. No fancy woodwork. Just a completely functional house."

"Looks like a big old barn," commented a student.

"It should," Roberts replied. "When Andrew Winkler—Lucille and Agnes' grandfather—had the house built, he used the plans of a barn. Andrew was as rich as Midas, but he was too cheap to hire an architect. In fact, the records show that he pulled some kind of financial gimmick so he didn't have to pay the builder more than half of what the job was worth."

Somewhere a student chuckled.

"When Andrew died," Roberts continued, "his son Jacob got the house. He added those three gables. According to the stories, Jake was something of a character. He showed his patriotism by flying a huge American flag he hung from that big pole sticking out from the center gable there, and at the same time increased the family fortune by robbing the government blind back in Roosevelt's day."

"Oh?" said a boy brightly. "Was that Franklin D.?"

"No," replied Roberts. "Teddy. Anyway, Jacob Winkler had three children. Lucille and Agnes, and then much later, a boy who later became Simon's father. When Jacob died, he left the house and grounds to the two women."

He paused. "Are you getting all this straight?"

"Yeah, we're right with you," said Jerry Lockley. "But enough of this history jazz. Let's get back to the good stuff."

"Just a little more background. It seems that about a year ago Simon Winkler discovered a flaw in his aunts' title to the house and property. By that time the women had gone through nearly all their money. They lost a bundle in the stock market crash of '29. The house was about all they had left. But Simon saw an opportunity to get the house for himself, leaving Lucille and Agnes with nothing. A cruel, heartless attitude, of course, but in my business we come across that sort of thing all the time. Anyway, he wrote to his aunts outlining his position and indicating that within a short time he'd be fully prepared to take them to court over the ownership of the place unless they could reach some kind of settlement with him."

"And that's what the meeting last July was all about?" asked Alice Doyle.

"That was it. So you see, the women make perfect suspects as far as motive is concerned. But means and opportunity? No way."

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The detective shook his head. "So there you have it. The death of Simon Winkler. Was it a perfect crime? Was it an accident? We just don't know. Frankly, this case seems immune to any logical approach. But I'd be very happy if Mr. Strang could shed any light on it. I don't like cases that remain in the Open File." He chuckled. "And neither does the lieutenant."

Silence. Twenty-nine pairs of eyes looked expectantly at Mr. Strang who was staring off into space.

"Any questions?" asked Roberts finally.

Jerry Lockley's hand shot up. Roberts nodded in his direction.

"I been thinking, you know," said Jerry. "Couldn't those ladies have tossed something out of the window of that center gable—something heavy? Whammo! Down it comes on ol' Simon's head. What about that, Mr. Roberts?"

The detective shook his head. "First of all, both women were old and weak. They could hardly have lifted a heavy object, much less toss it out a window. And even if one of them managed it, the gable is set back from the roof's edge. The distance down from the gable to the eaves is about eight feet. So the object would have either made a hole in the shingles or stayed on the roof or rolled off the edge, smashing the gutter. Our investigation showed everything intact and nothing was found on the roof. And remember, both Agnes and Lucille were at the front door with Father Penn at the exact moment of death. Finally, any object heavy enough to smash Winkler's skull couldn't have landed very far from the body. But we found nothing."

Jerry sank back into his seat.

"What if a guy hit Winkler and ran away fast?" someone called.

"Uh, uh. A man—especially one carrying a heavy object—would have left tracks in the soft earth unless he went straight down the front walk. And that walk's long enough so that even an Olympic runner couldn't have gotten away before the door was opened and he'd be seen."

Silence.

"Anything more?" Roberts asked.

"Just one thing, Paul," said Mr. Strang softly.

"What's that?"

"Was there a laundry room anywhere on the ground floor?"

Roberts screwed up his face, puzzled. "Yeah," he said finally. "Right next to the kitchen. A little room with an automatic washer at least fifteen years old. Why?"

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"Did the laundry room have an outside window?"

Roberts consulted his folder. "A little one, yeah. But—"

"Thank you, Paul," said the teacher. "Thank you very much."

"Hey, you mean you've got a handle on this case?"

The teacher nodded.

"Well, give!"

Before Mr. Strang could reply, the bell rang.

Over the excited humming of the students as they shoved their way toward the door, Jerry Lockley's voice rang out loudly.

"Well, all *RIGHT!*"

WEDNESDAY: THE CONCLUSION "Glad to see you back, Paul," Mr. Strang began. "I'm just sorry Father Penn couldn't make it." He turned to address the class.

"The murder of Simon Winkler—"

"Wait a minute!" Paul Roberts called out. "I told you yesterday, without proof you can't accuse—"

"Oh, to be sure, but Winkler *was* murdered. By his aunts, of course. The problem is *how* they did it. And I hope to explain that today."

He pressed his fingers together thoughtfully. "Lucille and Agnes Winkler," he said. "Represented to us yesterday as a pair of sweet, frightened, rather doddering old octogenarians. And yet their grandfather did a builder out of his just payment, their father swindled money from the government, and their nephew was preparing to take the roof from over their heads through legal chicanery. From one generation to the next the Winkler family has not only been devious but completely without scruples. If only from the standpoint of heredity, can we expect less from the ladies?

"I say no! The method of murder was not only heartless, as all murders are, it was also devilishly clever—as might be expected from the descendants of Andrew and Jacob Winkler."

"Hardly proof, Mr. Strang," said Roberts. "What about the weapon?"

"Ah, yes, the weapon. I was struck, Paul, by your description of the gardening tools at the front door. Would women who kept the house as neat as a pin—your words, Paul—have left those objects lying about? I doubt it. Furthermore, you mentioned a *shiny* new pair of grass shears. Shiny, after three days and nights of wet weather? No rust? Oh, come now.

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"No, the tools were put there, probably just before Father Penn arrived, for just one purpose—to camouflage the murder weapon.

"Now what are the requirements for such a weapon? Basically it must be heavy—massive, in fact. Therefore we eliminate the basket, the trowel, and the shears. All too light."

He bent down behind the demonstration table and brought up an object that bonged as it hit the table's hard surface.

"A sprinkling can," he said simply. "Borrowed from my landlady and similar, I daresay, to the one you found, Paul. Weight, perhaps a pound or two. But—"

He moved the can underneath the curved faucet at one end of the table and turned the water on full. In a few seconds the can was brimming. Mr. Strang hooked a spring scale to the handle and lifted.

"Fourteen pounds," he announced. "A massive club indeed. A weapon fit for a Samson. That's what struck down Simon Winkler. So heavy and deadly when full"—he emptied the water into the sink and tossed the can into the air—"and so light and harmless when empty."

"But—" Roberts began.

"How was the blow delivered? Jerry Lockley's theory of yesterday was close to the mark."

Jerry tapped his brow, but Roberts shook his head. "Mr. Strang, neither of those ladies could toss something that heavy eight feet from the second floor onto—"

"No, Paul." The teacher's finger traced a diagonal in the air. "It was eight feet from the gable to the eaves. But that's on a diagonal, down a sloping roof. The actual horizontal distance couldn't have been much more than four feet, maybe less."

"Even so, a can full of water being heaved four feet? By two old women who weren't even on the same floor? What are you trying to give me?"

"You're forgetting something. On that center gable there was a means to suspend the can beyond the edge of the roof. Think, Paul. All of you. Think back to Jacob Winkler. Remember what—"

"The flagpole!" cried Jerry Lockley. "Hey, yeah. A can attached to the rope on that flagpole and pulleyed out to clear the roof."

"And since the pole was for a large flag, it would be fairly sturdy," nodded the teacher.

Then Jerry shook his head. "No way, Mr. Strang."

"Why, Jerry?"

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"Look, the can is hanging there, right? Maybe getting full of water from the rain. But you want us to believe it just happened to break loose at exactly the right time? I ain't buying that."

"Of course not. You see, when the can was hauled out to the end of the flagpole, it was empty. And the rain was simply a cover for what really happened."

"Huh?"

"What did Lucille Winkler tell Father Penn she'd been doing the week before the rain?"

"Moving lawn sprinklers. So what?"

"Hoses," said the teacher. "Think of the lengths of hose required to water that huge yard. Put together they'd make an incredible length."

Jerry's finger moved upward and then horizontally, making an inverted L in the air. Then a broad grin split his face. "That's why you asked about the laundry room, ain't it, Mr. Strang?"

"You mean—" Roberts began.

Mr. Strang nodded. "Imagine a length of hose attached to a faucet in the laundry room—a faucet which had to be threaded to accommodate the washing machine and to which a garden hose could therefore be attached. Imagine that hose leading out the laundry window, up the rear of the house, through the upper hallway to the middle gable in front. Think of it snaking out along the flagpole with its open end directly over a sprinkling can hanging there."

"I see what you mean," said the detective. "But you still haven't answered the boy's question. How could the can be made to break loose at exactly the right time?"

"As I said earlier, the gardening tools were out of place, considering the weather," Mr. Strang answered. "But there's another incongruous element here, Paul. Do you recall what Father Penn was reading while waiting for Lucille in the living room?"

"Yeah, a book on fishing. So?"

"In a house inhabited by two aged spinsters? Highly unlikely reading material, wouldn't you say? No, that book was in the house for a specific purpose."

"What purpose?"

"Research. On fishing line."

"Huh?"

"Fishing line," Mr. Strang repeated. "It's the one type of string or cord that's made to extremely close breaking tolerances. That's

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so those who catch fish on lighter lines will receive more credit for the skill than those who use heavier tackle. And there's a line which breaks at a strain of twelve pounds. The breaking strain is precise to within an ounce or so. I verified that yesterday with a call to Morey's Sport Shop."

Mr. Strang preened, brushing at the wrinkled lapels of his jacket as if he were wearing regal finery. "In summary, class—Paul—here's how the murder must have been accomplished. The Winkler women invited Simon to call on a day when heavy rain was a certainty. That morning Lucille lowered a long length of hose from an upstairs rear window to the window in the laundry room and attached one end of the hose to the tap in the laundry room. The other end was led to the front center gable, where both hose and sprinkling can were tied to the flagpole rope by the same piece of twelve-pound-test fishing line. This apparatus was hauled out to a point directly above the front stoop. The sheer wall of the house, which left neither Father Penn nor Simon Winkler protected from the pelting rain, also had nothing to divert the can in its fall. Oh, I'm sure Lucille tested the rig several times in previous weeks to get the trajectory exactly right. Just as I'm sure she tested the amount of time it took the can to fill to a point where the line would break.

"On the appointed day the sisters invite Father Penn to visit—the perfect, incorruptible, unimpeachable witness. Finally the three of them see Simon arriving. At that point Agnes suggests tea. Why? As an excuse for her sister to leave the room, of course. Then the sisters had their private little joke."

"What joke?" asked Roberts.

"You'll recall that as Simon was getting out of the taxi, Father Penn noticed a strange look which passed between the ladies. And then, what did Lucille say to Agnes?"

"Why—" Roberts's eyes widened. "It was *'I'll put the water on'*."

There was a collective gasp from the students.

"I see you catch my meaning," said the teacher. "On her way to the kitchen Lucille enters the laundry room and turns on the tap to a degree determined by earlier practise. As Simon arrives at the door, the can above his head is filling."

"Wouldn't he have seen it hanging there?" asked Roberts.

"Unlikely. In a rainstorm the tendency is to lower the head into the collar of the coat." Mr. Strang proceeded to demonstrate. "Inside the front door Lucille fumbles with the bolt. After all, the

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timing may not be absolutely perfect. She must wait for the can to drop.

"At length it does, smashing into Simon's skull with almost the force of a cannonball. The can drops to one side, spilling its contents onto the already soaked earth, and lands innocently among the strategically placed gardening tools. The hose above snaps back to the roof, and its stream of water sluices across the shingles and into the gutters, joining the torrent gushing down the leaders."

"But weren't those two taking a big chance?" Roberts asked. "I mean, what if Simon had moved just a little bit to one side or the other?"

"Not too big a chance," was the reply. "You see, Simon had to open the storm door to get at the knocker. Now when he heard Lucille fumbling with the lock inside, it would be instinctive for him to hold the storm door open so he could get inside in a hurry. And at that point his position would be as predictable as the phases of the moon."

"But wouldn't we have seen that hose draped through the house when we came to investigate?" asked the detective.

"Probably—if it had been left in place. But Lucille went back into the house to call the police. I suspect that it was then she turned off the water in the laundry room and disconnected the hose. Then she slipped upstairs and dragged the rest of the hosing through the house and pushed it out the rear window. Once it fell to the ground out in back, it became just an innocent length of rubber tubing."

The old teacher made a stiff but elegant bow to his class. "Alpha and omega," he said, grinning. "Do any of you have any questions?"

There was a clinking of coins followed by Jerry Lockley's whisper: "Pay up, Richie. I told you he'd come through."

For several moments Roberts considered Mr. Strang's solution. "It hangs together, I'll say that for it," he announced finally. "Weird, like the papers said, but that had to be how it was done. Only—"

"Only what, Paul?"

"How do we go about proving it?"

"Is that really necessary?" Mr. Strang caressed the briar pipe in his jacket pocket. "I mean with Lucille already dead and Agnes in a nursing home with little time left—"

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"Oh, I wouldn't take any official action. I'd just like to know for my own satisfaction. And to be able to close out this case."

"Perhaps you might begin by checking the local sporting and camping stores. Lucille must have purchased that fishing line somewhere."

The detective patted the teacher on the back with a massive hand. "Mr. Strang, you're something else. I don't suppose you'd ever consider taking up police work on a full-time basis."

"Sorry, Paul. My class and I have an appointment with the fallacy of undistributed middle." The teacher drew a large circle on the board with two smaller circles inside it. "And we're three days late as it is."

"Q"

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

FAR AFIELD: In the previous issue we discussed several books by writers not normally associated with the mystery field—authors who went beyond their usual form to test their skills at the most demanding of all forms of literature (as W. Somerset Maugham once described it). A striking example of unexpected performances in the mystery field are the Gothic thrillers of Louisa May Alcott, best known for her children's books. Last year several novellas were collected in *Behind a Mask,* and now a sequel has been published which collects the remainder of her pseudonymous output in the type of story usually associated with Wilkie Collins, the Brontes, and Ann Radcliffe. *Plots and Counterplots* (Morrow, $9.95) contains two short novels and three short stories. Don't expect to find the sweetness-and-light heroines of *Little Women.* These Alcott women have powerful sexual passions, smoke dope, and find themselves in dark foreboding castles with their lives and sanity at stake.

NOT FOR W.C. FIELDS: It may not be kind to say it but, for most adults, the average children's book has all the thrills and excitement of a runny nose. A notable exception that deserves a standing ovation for its continued charm and attention to good storytelling is the series about Basil of Baker Street, the mouse detective who lives in the basement of Sherlock Holmes' lodging. Author Eve Titus has a rare ability to capture *le nom juste* (the evil Professor Ratigan, Mrs. Judson the mousekeeper, the priceless painting, the Mousa Lisa). Paul Galdone is the artist, and seldom has there been such a perfect blending of talents —perhaps not since A. A. Milne and E. H. Shepard collaborated on the books about Winnie the Pooh. The fourth in the series, *Basil in Mexico* (McGraw-Hill, $5.95), is out, and you're not too old to love it!

COVERING THE FIELD: Mystery fans have been blessed with an assortment of "fanzines" through the years—those one-man operations that are produced purely as labors of love. Deliberately tail-

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ored for a select readership, they do not reach a massive audience. The best and most ambitious is inarguably *The Armchair Detective.* During its decade-long life, it has been produced solely by Allen J. Hubin, one of the leading mystery fans, experts, and collectors in the world. He has finally given up the business and production end of the magazine to completely devote his efforts to editorial matters. For articles by, for, and about every interesting and important person involved in mystery fiction, it is in a class by itself. Subscriptions are available at $10 per year (four issues) from *The Armchair Detective,* 243 Twelfth Street, Del Mar, Calif. 92014.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Suspense, "radio's outstanding theater of thrills," was the longest-running (June of 1942 to September, 1962) mystery anthology series of the medium, its quality uniformly excellent and some of its programs legendary. Happily, there is now a movement to syndicate the old shows anew so that fresh audiences may yet learn that priceless ingredient of radio mystery: the listener's imagination, swirling the groundfog and filling in the shadows. The ominous opening (hosted during the first weeks by a sepulchral "Man in Black," later by the show's erudite producer, William Robson) and the chilling chimes of its signature-music still haunt the memory.

Suspense had quality from the very first show—an adaptation of John Dickson Carr's "The Burning Court"!—followed the second week by John Collier's "Wet Saturday." The first seasons featured some extraordinary programming. There were several Agatha Christie works, including "Philomel Cottage" and "The ABC Murders," and Carr contributed many original dramas, among them "Cabin B-13"—about a bride on her shipboard honeymoon whose husband vanishes—which was so popular it spun off a CBS radio series, the reminiscenses of a ship's doctor at strange ports-of-call. Cornell Woolrich stories were at their macabre best, especially Lucille Ball's stalked hostess in "Dime a Dance" (1/13/44).

An endless parade of well-known performers appeared on the show. Orson Welles was a frequent early guest, his best shot being a superb rendering of "Donovan's Brain" which reshaped the Siodmak book. The single most memorable program appears to have been Lucille Fletcher's "Sorry, Wrong Number," with Agnes Moorehead as the invalid eavesdropping on a telephone

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murder plot (5/25/43), a classic that was repeated nearly annually thereafter.

By the mid-forties, under the able direction of William Spier, the program's popularity was at its height, and it ran the gamut of mystery, from James Cain's tough "Love's Lovely Counterfeit" (first starring Humphrey Bogart, then repeated with James Cagney) to a Halloween performance of Ronald Coleman in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Dunwich Horror."

The series lasted into the twilight of dramatic radio. In its last years, under Producer Elliott Lewis, it veered into docu-drama: Dillinger's demise, e.g., and Dinah Shore in the "true" story of Frankie and Johnny. There were many repeats encoring favorites—"The Most Dangerous Game," "Owl Creek Bridge," Woolrich's "Nightmare," etc. Throughout two decades, however, it never lessened its dedication to the Man in Black's early promise. It was a program "compounded of mystery and intrigue and dangerous adventure...tales calculated to keep you in *suspense.*"

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INTERVIEW: DONALD WESTLAKE

One of the unwritten rules of mystery fiction for many years was that it should not be mixed with humor. Only a handful of writers tired it successfully, notably Craig Rice. When Donald Westlake turned his exceptional skills to that form, he wrote some of the funniest books of the past decade or so. His books have served as the source for several films, including *The Busy Body, The Hot Rock, Cops and Robbers,* and *Bank Shot.* Because of Westlake's success, there have been more attempts at humorous mysteries in the past decade than in the previous ten combined.

EQMM: How do you feel about seeing your books adapted for the screen?

WESTLAKE: I sometimes have to remind myself that I shouldn't feel responsible. For good or bad—if the movie is terrific or awful, I deserve neither the credit nor the blame. What film companies do for the source—the guy who wrote the book—is set up a private screening. You can invite maybe 30 people or so. If it's a good movie, that's a very nice thing because you're surrounded by all your friends saying, "Hey, terrific." But if it's a dog, you're still surrounded by all your friends...

EQMM: All of whom are now backing out the door.

WESTLAKE: Yes, saying, "Well, it's interesting." You keep sitting lower and lower in your chair. You have to keep reminding yourself: it's not mine, I had nothing to do with it. Still, there is a terrible schizophrenic feeling when someone comes up to you and says,

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"Hey, I loved the movie." You still accept the praise. It's even worse if you hate it and think it's terrible. Then you're in the position of accepting praise for something you can't stand.

EQMM: Whatever possessed you to write about a character like Parker, who is so different from your humorous protagonists?

WESTLAKE: I just wanted to write about the most emotionless character I could find. He was planned as a one-shot, not a series character. One of the silly problems about Parker is that he is a professional and very efficient. Therefore, all things being equal, his novels should be about four pages long. He should come do it, get the money, and go away *The Hot Rock* started out as Parker novel. Dortmunder cam out of that character. I though What if Parker had to steal th same thing over and over again When I described the plot ide to people, they laughed and so di I. I figured I'd have to be carefu or else this tough piece could ge slightly out of tune and be ver funny—unintentionally. The ne: logical step was to make it inter tionally funny, so Parker becam Dortmunder.

(Note: Westlake published th Parker novels under the pseud nym Richard Stark.)

REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

DEVERON HALL, by Velda Johnston. Dodd, Mead & Company, $7.95.

Lisa Marsden comes uninvited to Deveron Hall, her mother's ancestral home in the Scottish Highlands and the scene long ago of a nightmarish tragedy in which her father was brutally killed. The reception she receives is far from welcoming, but it is not until an attempt on her own life almost succeeds that Lisa realizes there is a murderous evil still stalking the corridors of Deveron Hall.

"The glens and moors of Scotland form a romantic and mysterious backdrop for this exciting story. The author's surprises really work, and you could hardly find a more breathless climax scene. I loved it!"—Phyllis A. Whitney

ELLERY QUEEN'S GIANTS OF MYSTERY, edited by Ellery Queen. The Dial Press, $8.95.

This 31st in the series of semi-annual anthologies of stories first published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* contains 3 short novels and 11 short stories by such giants in the genre as Rex Stout, John D. MacDonald, Ed McBain, Robert L. Fish, Isaac Asimov, Berkely Mather, Holly Roth, E. X. Ferrars, Gerald Kersh, and Ellery Queen.

From Stout's Nero Wolfe, Asimov's Black Widowers, and Ellery and Richard Queen to McBain's 87th Precinct—and whether the reader's preference is for deduction or suspense, the police procedural or the pschological study —this collection is sure to satisfy all 'tec tastes.

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BACKLASH, by Judson Philips. Dodd, Mead & Company, $6.95.

Peter Styles, star journalist of *Newsview Magazine*, had been on the trail of an organization he called Violence Incorporated for a long time. His wife Grace wrote him from a Vietnamese refugee camp in California that she had heard rumors about the group's headquarters, but before he received her letter, he got the shattering news that she had been murdered. Was Violence Incorporated behind her death? Peter thinks so and begins his search with his only lead the identification of a dead schoolboy.

Well known for his novels of suspense, Judson Philips is "one of our best professionals."—*San Francisco Examiner-Chronicle*

GIVEN THE AMMUNITION, by Harriett Gilbert. Harper & Row, $8.95.

A rich munitions manufacturer and his wayward daughter are caught in a web of intrigue and generational misunderstanding in the latest from "this uncommonly intelligent and convincing writer." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"Capturing the contemporary situational ethics mood of the young 'mods,' this suspenseful novel, with its effective dénouement, makes insightful use of current headlines and the absence of heroes."—*Publishers Weekly*

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THE POE-TIC CORNER

DETECTIVERSE

PICK A DICK

by MARJORIE Q. BOYLE

Dr. Sam is not really a hick;
He's a clever dick adored by the sick.

Another sharp dick is Rafferty's Chick,
As is Mr. Velvet—I refer to Nick.

If, by chance, you should hear a click,
It will be, of course, the Photographer dick.

Age-wise closer to hen than chick
Is beloved Jane Marple, a dick who's a brick.

Captain Leopold and Petrella each carry a stick,
But Strang says psychology reveals how things tick.

Nero Wolfe and Ellery Queen are indubitably slick,
And Poirot, being Belgian, was not a French flic.

The Black Widowers' Henry sees straight through a trick,
And Lew Archer is a tough guy to lick.

Analyzing each dick has been a big kick,
But I'm wondering whether I'm a bit thick.
Though I've pondered until my brain has a crick,
I can't figure out why no dick is named *DICK!*

© *1976 by Marjorie Q. Boyle.*

Editorial Note: To forestall letters from readers we hasten to remind Ms. Boyle that there are quite a few—Dick Tracy, to name just one.

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THE POE-TIC CORNER

DETECTIVERSE

OUT OF THE MOUTHS

by SANNA M. McGLATHERY

The case of murder had Holmes stumped.
The body was found on the drive.
He and Watson searched for clues.
Who had last seen the body alive?
"Shall we ask the maid or the butler?"
Dr. Watson rubbed his chin.
"Perhaps the chauffeur, dear old chap,"
Replied Mr. Holmes with a grin.
They peered at every bush and tree
With a magnifying glass.
"Aha! Dear Watson, look at this—
An old shoe, here, on the grass!"
"Good grief, Holmes, that shoe is mine!"
"Well, well." Sherlock narrowed his eyes;
"The culprit must indeed be you—
You and your clever lies!"
The case was really not Holmes's best,
Watson hadn't hurt a soul;
For on that day the famous pair
Was only ten years old.
'Twas just a game we children played
In the garden between our homes,
My good friend Jim was Watson,
And I was Sherlock Holmes.

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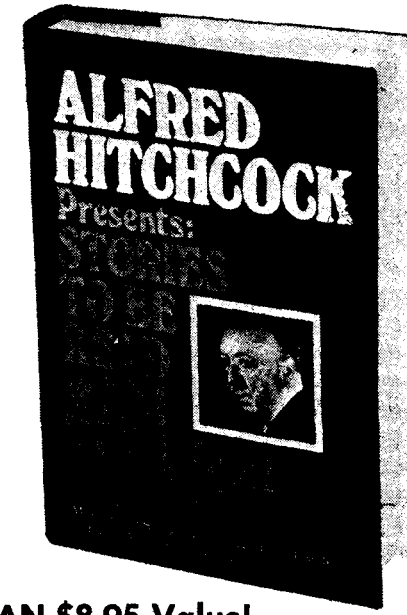

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IN MEMORIAM

a NEW short story by ROSALIND ASHE

Edgar Allan Poe, the most famous of all mystery writers, died on October 7, 1849—127 years ago. In memory of that sorrowful date, and in memory of other mystery writers who were interested in spiritualism and the supernatural, particularly A. Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, we offer you an unusual ghost story—about a ghost who haunted a staircase at Oxford University and who was summoned—materialized—with terrifying and tragic results. Are you afraid of the dark? No? Then meet the long glass man—more accurately, "a gray man—gray and shiny like dirty glass" . . .

THE LONG GLASS MAN

by ROSALIND ASHE

"I take it we all agree on the fact of A Supernatural, and that so-called ghosts that most of us accept as the supernatural take form only for a select few. But the idea of a *harmful* ghost is to me simply ridiculous."

We had finished dessert and adjourned to the smaller common room at the top of the staircase, a move that tended to sort the men from the boys. Only the hard-drinking, hard-talking brigade usually made the final assault up the spiral staircase, headed by the bachelors, natural climbers with nothing to lose, closely followed by the long-married—those who knew that, by this late hour, their North Oxford home fires would be banked down with tea leaves for the night, and the only voice in the house would be a note of instructions on the kitchen table concerning cats and dustbins.

Here the firelight glowed through one's malt whiskey, and the

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deep leather chairs were difficult to get out of. But Littlemount did not sit; he was in good voice and needed props and space to make his points: three strides to the sideboard and back, tap out pipe, eat a Chocolate Oliver from the silver biscuit box especially stocked for him—and never once a pause in his flow. He was summing up an argument that had started at his end of the long table. I had asked someone quite casually, "Are you afraid of the dark?" and it had all stemmed from that.

"So we must conclude," said Littlemount, "that the only harm a ghost can do is to drive us into self-inflicted harm, mental or physical: we can die of fright; or flee, and fall downstairs and break our necks; or allow our shaking candle to set the bed curtains alight; but we cannot be stabbed or strangled by an immaterial being. How could it hold a knife? Or press insubstantial thumbs on our windpipe? They would pass right through, would they not, and meet ineffectually on the other side. Admit, sir, ghosts do not have the molecular structure to commit murder."

The target of his punch line was a stranger, presumably someone's guest. He too was on his feet; he stood very tall and saturnine, observing Littlemount's restless terrier-like scuttling. Only his eyes moved, bright under heavy brows. "In that case, we must take care not to alter that molecular structure," he said.

"Oh, come now, Littlemount—" Stacey, one of the younger dons, was busy with bottles at the sideboard and seemed not to notice the hush of confrontation, all eyes on the tall guest. "Surely ghosts must have *some* sort of structure or, according to your theory, they would simply sink through the floor."

It was the stranger who answered him.

"It seems that apparitions run along well-defined tracks, the groove carved out by the horrific circumstances of their own peculiar tragedy. Extreme suffering or guilt, or both, appear to be the commonest causes. The happy ghost that haunts its favorite spot is as surely a cosy Victorian invention. The strongest motive for a ghost to return is that of completion—something unfinished, something still to do, whether it's revenge or the expiation of guilt. Hidden treasure? Aye, sir, but usually come by foul play. True love? But unrequited, unsatisfied: 'I will hang my heart on the weeping willow tree—'

" 'So that the nun who wrings her hands—'

" 'And the horseman who rides over the cobbles and up to the door—'

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" 'The baby in the guest wing that crouches by the grate—'

"Yes, they are all endlessly replaying their tragic moment, fixed in their groove. And that, gentlemen, is some people's idea of hell."

"Certainly, certainly—" Littlemount clearly felt it was time to gather up the reins again. "We are not disputing that ghosts are attached to one place; no well-documented apparition *follows* folk to haunt them, or materializes anywhere but in its proper lair. But that is not to say that a ghost, even an armed ghost, like Hamlet's father, could inflict an injury—"

"You mean if, even briefly, it could have assumed some sort of corporeal solidity."

"Ah, by possession of a living person—that is an altogether different matter, my good fellow, if you will forgive the pun."

"Very well, we shall agree to keep Possession out of this, or we will get bogged down in Demonism and have to resort to the Power of the Church. There is an example of materialization in its full sense of which I could tell you, if you have the patience to hear. It is a disturbing documentary but sufficiently rare to amount to a curiosity rather than a threat to your peace of mind."

Littlemount himself recharged the stranger's glass and installed him in what was habitually the Master's chair. Another log was thrown on the fire, and someone even suggested turning down the lights.

"No," said our storyteller, "they will do very well. Let us approach this in the spirit of the well-illuminated scientific inquiry—for that is just the way it started.

"It was nearly thirty years ago, just after the war, in this university; the college we can ignore, and for the individuals we shall invent names. Many undergraduates were older then, coming back from the front. Black, let us call him, had served in Burma and returned to finish his degree, changing from mathematics to philosophy.

"Now, Black was psychic—abnormally so. Early in his country childhood he had shown what is commonly called 'second sight,' in everything from party games to the revelation of distant disasters. His adolescence had been troubled by poltergeists; in the army he learned to conceal his powers both from his commanding officers—it does morale no good to have a clairvoyant in the lines—and from his fellows, for whom he confined it to light betting; he was never short of cigarettes.

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"In Burma he made contact with the mystic sect of a religious order who accepted him as a gifted seer, and opened their sacred books to him. So, equipped with a full appreciation of his powers, and the discipline to disguise them, he returned to Oxford. His purpose was research, but not quite on the lines laid down by his tutors.

"Our other protagonist is an American, a Fulbright scholar who amply merited the hopeful title. White, we shall call him, was a child prodigy, a so-called 'Whiz kid,' who had been 'discovered' early and overexposed on wireless and television in the United States. His had been a childhood of tutors and business managers, of hotels, taxis, the bright lights. He had a nervous breakdown in his teens, after being accused of cheating—a resounding scandal in that deeply puritan nation, and the occasion for extended editorial heartsearching. He took the only other way out: he cut loose from his family, changed his name, and buried himself in a small midwestern college. There he covered himself with honors, *summa cum laude,* and won a scholarship to Oxford, England.

"White knew he was psychic, but had never fully exploited his powers; he was afraid of them. Now, like a reformed alcoholic, he refused even to touch the charmed bottle—he did not know what sort of djinn he might release. But, like the reformed alcoholic, he grew confident, and halfway through his first term he decided to test himself. He saw an ESP Meeting advertised on the Junior Common Room notice board, and dared to attend.

"He found it disappointing. It seemed chiefly concerned with the phenomenon of coincidence. In the darkened church hall fuzzy slides of drawings that approximated each other, produced by subjects in isolated cubicles, were flashed onto a screen; lists of numerals were analyzed and hummed over. All so much Wincarnis to the alcoholic. He left early, and was followed and joined by a fellow deserter. They walked back toward College together.

"Now, Black had already marked down the young American as a fellow psychic; seeing him at the ESP gathering had simply determined him to make a move. White was flattered by the attentiveness, indeed the concentration, with which his cautious observations were treated by his senior. He had found his fellow freshmen generally hearty and callow, straight from school, unlike the war heroes now in their second and third years. They, he felt, had lived; he, who had already been through so much, longed to be accepted by them—and especially by Black, the loner in his

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army greatcoat, for whom he sensed a peculiar affinity.

"So the acquaintanceship flourished; they visited each other's rooms, went to concerts together, walked on Otmore, and at the end of term Black invited the American home for Christmas. Before they left, they made arrangements for White to move to his friend's staircase; the freshman who had the small attic room there was only too glad to agree to the exchange, though at the time White did not understand the reason for this eagerness.

"Up to this point the two young men had discussed the supernatural only because they had discussed everything. White had told his new friend of his prodigious childhood and the traumatic denouement that ended it. Black had spoken of the monks and their teachings, but both had avoided the subject of the extrasensory powers of which they were increasingly aware.

"In White this was fear; in Black, the patient taming of that fear. Full revelation Black left to the vacation, and to his possessive mother—a simple woman who had been cheated of her maternal rights by Black's violent independence. As he foresaw, she took the young American under her wing and used him at once as a second son and confidant. To him, late one evening, she unburdened her worries about her dark lamb—so clever, but so unstable; and the mess the poltergeists used to make; and how he had known when a favorite cousin in Inverness was killed rock climbing.

"The American spent the night in heartsearching; but he knew he could not deny this supernatural gift now summoned by one of even greater strength. The reformed alcoholic reached for the bottle.

"I have dwelt on this relationship to show how emphatically young Black was the prime mover; it also helps to explain the load of guilt he carried ever after.

"But at the time it felt more the shedding of a load. It was Christmas morning; they celebrated their new partnership with juvenile high spirits; on the way to Church they predicted the hymn numbers. Both hit on the same numerals, in the same order, and the board beside the pulpit simply confirmed the result. Without a word they abandoned the family and service, turned their backs—symbolically?—on the Church, and walked and talked on the moors till dark and dinnertime.

"Now for the first time in his life Black opened his whole mind to another individual. From their original encounter they had

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found themselves anticipating each other's thoughts, answering unspoken questions, meeting without arranging time or place. Now, in a few hours, the older told the younger all he knew, all the monks had taught him, all he planned to do. For his great experiment was with the supernatural, his goal to effect a true materialization, and he needed a more powerful 'current' than he alone could supply. He explained his deliberate choice of rooms in college: they were said to be haunted.

"Back at Oxford, term had not yet started, and they had the staircase to themselves. It was in the corner of the inner quadrangle; White's was only a small fusty garret, but he spent most of his time in his friend's rooms below. Even here the large study was dark, set in the angle of the two high walls, but there was always a bright fire in the opulently carved fireplace, for Black had a well-trained and devoted scout. Bunce had been with the college all his life and was held to be the authority on the staircase ghost; he could remember it all being told when he was a lad and considered too young to listen to such things.

"It seems that Black's rooms had been the scene of a Victorian scandal, when the rooms were occupied by an aging and eccentric theologian in holy orders, as most dons still were. It was said that he had been the cause of driving a pupil mad, to the point of suicide. Soon after, the don himself had died of causes unknown—had been discovered lying by that same ornate chimney-piece; and it was he who apparently haunted the staircase—footsteps on the creaking treads, sometimes the frantic rustling of pages. Once he had been seen, a tall gaunt figure standing motionless with his hands on the mantel shelf.

"Fifty years later these were still the hardest rooms in college to fill; none of the Fellows wanted them—too dark, they said. So when Black volunteered, on condition he could have the whole suite to himself, the Bursar had agreed. In this way Black acquired an inner sanctum, the dressing room, which he kept locked, even to his cleaner. There his precious books were safe from curious eyes, and he could meditate without interruption.

"Moreover, he covered the window with blackout material and developed photographs in the basin. He told White how for many nights he had set up a camera with its shutter open, focused to take in the whole of the fireplace, in an attempt to capture an impression of the ghostly theologian. One of the prints was quite interesting.

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"In it there appeared to be two things hanging from the mantelshelf, barely discernible among the carved swags and curlicues—they might have been a pair of socks put there to dry. He let White pore over it, then produced his masterpiece, a blowup of one of the 'socks'; now one could guess that it was not furry, or gauzy, as it had seemed at first sight, but that it had moved. And the upper edge, pale against the back wall, was corrugated, bumpy, like a row of knuckles.

" 'I believe that is where it stands,' said Black. 'Why only its hands appear I don't yet know. But I propose to stand in just that place—hence the importance of this photograph—and concentrate on putting out as much current as I can summon. If I feel anything—well, that is where you come in. For then we will need to boost the output. According to my theory, my batteries would be drained before our aim is achieved—a theory that explains many of the disastrous attempts at materialization in the past. But between us we may have enough psychic 'juice' to bring this thing about. And if one of us should suffer, or worse, there is a helper at hand, someone to give first aid, and—more important in my eyes—to be a witness.'

"Out of term college retires early. By eleven only a few dim squares of light showed where the midnight oil burned, and by twelve our psychic investigators decided there was no further fear of interruption. They locked the door, built up the fire, and turned out all except one small reading lamp. Then, while White stood where the camera had been and directed him from the photograph, Black positioned himself with his hands on the mantelpiece.

"At first Black gazed down at the fire, but it distracted him. He closed his eyes and summoned up all his concentration into a single fierce imperative: 'Come.' Fifteen minutes passed by White's watch, and still his friend hung, his head fallen forward, crucified against the high carved fireplace.

"Suddenly he gave a low moan. 'It's *cold*,' he whispered, and turned his head towards his left hand. White could see nothing. 'My hand is so cold.' As they watched, a mistiness appeared over the fist that clung to the shelf. Slowly a line of light emerged along the translucent blur, defining its upper edge: a long delicate bony hand apparently fashioned out of cloudy glass—for the whiteness of the knuckles was still visible through it.

"Then with a sharp cry Black twisted his head the other way,

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his eyes staring. 'Quick, help me! It's got both my hands—' His friend was beside him. 'Take over its left hand with your right,' Black whispered, 'palm to palm, remember. I will concentrate on this one—oh, the cold is creeping through me—'

"White moved warily round him; whatever might be standing there, he had no wish to pass through it. He stood close to the two left hands, felt the chill radiating from them, and saw the horrible perfection of the 'glass' one, engraved with the outline of nails and a fine mesh of wrinkles. It was only the desperate, voiceless appeal in his friend's face as he twisted round for a moment that gave White the strength to put his right hand forward. He slid it, palm upward, under the transparent hand, as Black gently removed his.

"The penetrating cold struck into White; it seemed to paralyze everything but the memory of Black's reiterated command: 'When it comes, do not flinch. Think, this is what we have worked toward; it is in our grasp. And give it all your strength.'

"Concentrating on that, White slowly raised his frozen hand; the glass one rose with it, and he could feel the answering pressure, as of something living, through the clinging tackiness of something dead.

"Black flexed his free hand, held it briefly to the fire's warmth, then placed it, palm up, under the icy mist that was gathering over his right. He reached out to White, and their grip completed the circuit. Now they stood with their backs to the fire, and grateful for it, pressing against a force they could not see, passing their vital strength to it, willing it with all their combined psychic powers to take form. There appeared before them a cloudy shape; next, the glassy outline, high and narrow. They felt their strength fading as it grew more solid, like a sketch being colored in, obscuring the room behind it, and even casting a flickering shadow across the carpet.

"It was a villainous old man, tall and stooping, in a crumpled dog collar and a long rusty academic gown. It nodded sharply and withdrew its hands from theirs. 'Thank you, dear boys—that will suffice.' The voice was a harsh whisper carried on foul carrion breath. It grinned wolfishly. 'Your part is over for the present. It will be interesting to see, will it not, how long your little experiment holds shape.' It stalked to the door. 'I will be back again when I have need of you.'

White took a step forward and crumpled up in a dead faint.

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Black and fallen to his knees, his senses weak and whirling. He tried to crawl forward, and caught at the creature's gown, but he heard the key turn, the door slam, and it was gone. His fading thought was: Lord, what have we done?

"The scout found them still unconscious beside the dead fire. The room was icy cold. He called the cleaner from the next staircase, and she covered them with blankets while he brewed coffee and built up a roaring blaze in the grate.

" 'Such goings on all in one night!' Black heard them from a great distance, clucking together as they set the room to rights—and was suddenly wide-awake. He kept his eyes closed and listened.

" 'I don't surmise, Mrs. Hart, that the two happenings could be in any way connected. I observe no signs of violence here—overindulgence, perhaps—but nothing like the state of the Lodge. Poor Mr. Cartwright—porter for twenty-two years—and then to be bludgeoned to his death like a dog by some interloper!'

" 'So you don't think it can have been anyone from College, Mr. Bunce?'

" 'No, Mrs. Hart. Mr. Cartwright was, I imagine, persuaded to open the night door to this stranger, tried to ring the police when he was attacked—and there's the switchboard mangled, the door left open—'

"Black groaned and sat up. 'Ah, you're better, sir. What happened to you and Mr. White? Nothing odd was it, sir? Can you remember?'

"Black felt extraordinarily weak, and needed time to disentangle the events of the night. He pleaded a hangover, and dismissed the raised eyebrows and pursed lips with a boyish appeal for lots of ham and eggs. 'It must have been some gin one of the medical students pressed on us to try,' he said; 'tasted more like methylated spirits—' Murmuring indulgently, they went off to the kitchen.

"Then Black tried to wake his friend who still lay, breathing stertorously, wrapped in a blanket on the floor. He carried him to his own bed, tried to rouse him with brandy, and placed wet towels on his forehead, but without success. He closed the door on him when his scout carried up the breakfast, and was forced to hear out, and react suitably to, the awful tale of the murdered porter.

" 'I'll bring you up the *Mail* when it arrives, sir. Terrible thing.

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The police will want to question everyone who was in College last night, I understand, sir.' And at any moment White might stagger through the door saying, 'Where did it go? What has it done?'

"At last Black was alone again. He put his friend's breakfast on a trivet by the fire and went into the bedroom. White was lying with his eyes open, dazed and feeble; he let himself be helped into the study, and sat hunched, sipping his coffee, while he heard about the disastrous results of their experiment. Neither of them was in any doubt that the spirit they had summoned and given corporeal being was the porter's killer.

" 'It will not get far,' Black said over and over again; 'not enough current. No, it will just disappear, and revert to its proper place. And that is where we shall leave it.'

" 'But a *double* tragedy! To have indirectly caused a murder, and, worse still—for the interests of science—to have succeeded so triumphantly and have no proof. For now we are forced to remain silent, and we cannot, we must not, call it back.'

"Bunce arrived with the newspaper, from which he read aloud the full account of the Lodge murder and the findings so far. The murder weapon was identified as a heavy shovel that was kept in the Lodge in winter for clearing snow from the doors; and a policeman on his beat in the High Street had seen a tall bent man in a cloak or gown hurrying towards Magdalen. He followed, but found only a drunk drowsing on one of the benches along the bridge, babbling of a 'long glass man.' 'Must have seen a deal too many long glasses already that evening, I don't doubt,' commented Bunce. 'And please, sirs, to come down to the Bursary. The police want fingerprints of everyone in College.'

"Black and White answered the few questions put to them by the detective inspector. They knew that the glass man must have disappeared, and that their story was too incredible to put forward; so they felt their implication in the affair was best forgotten. Let it be another unsolved murder—for now there was no murderer.

"No, they said, they had heard nothing, seen nothing; they had drunk too much and slept heavily and late. Their fingerprints were taken—and, abruptly, the whole situation changed. When the sets of imprints were compared with those the police had found, it became clear that those of Black's left hand and White's right hand *were the same as those on the shaft of the shovel;* and again, among others, on the handle of the night door and its key.

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"Every whorl and twist was there, crisply reproduced, totally incriminating, even down to the cut on the cushion of Black's thumb from testing the keenness of the Christmas carving knife two weeks before. The law gathered round, holding the glass slides of ink imprints up to the light, and comparing them with the photographs taken of the marks on the handle of the shovel. It was an open-and-shut case.

"The accused men were white and dumfounded. 'But we didn't do it!' stammered Black. 'I mean, how could we *both* have held the shovel—'

" 'Perhaps you will tell me,' said the inspector; 'but you both seem to be in pretty bad shape. I suggest that it was simply a matter of neither of you being strong enough to manage the wretched business alone.'

" 'Please, sir—' It was the young policeman who had been on the beat. 'There's something funny about these here prints. We've been holding them the wrong way round.'

" 'Nonsense, Constable. See here—exact!'

" 'Yes, sir, but the ink is on the other side of the glass. Look, sir, they're the right imprints but the wrong way round—mirror images like, sir—'

"White leaped to his feet and was pressed down by heavy hands.

" 'But that's what happened!' he cried. 'Don't you *see?*' He turned to Black. 'We gave it *our* fingerprints. It had no form: its hands took shape against ours—like ectoplasm, like putty—'

" 'Yes, and during the time it was drawing on our strength its hands were against ours, your right, my left. The rest of it grew solid in its own form—but it kept the mark of its first contact, the prints we passed on to it.'

"Then there was nothing for it but to tell the law all that had happened—all about their precious, closely guarded experiments, their extrasensory powers, the materialization. The police took it all down, as they were bound to do. But they did not believe a word of it.

" 'But don't you see? *There is no murderer!*'

" 'Just because he has not been found? How can you prove your story? I suggest rather that you have worked yourselves—through this tampering with the so-called occult—into a sort of irresponsible, indeed vicious, stupor—drugs may have been involved. And in attempting to leave College after midnight you encountered opposition from the porter and, together, killed him. You may

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plead temporary insanity—but *only your prints* are on that shovel.'

" 'But *reversed!* How were they reversed? Give us a chance to show you what happened—' Black pleaded.

" 'Oh, no!' said White. 'Not that way—'

" 'It's all we can do, you fool! Let them be at hand and arrest It if they can, fingerprint It, put It behind bars. And I wish them joy of It.'

"The mystery of the mirror-image fingerprints would not, as they well knew, stand up in court; so the police agreed to give them one night to prove their case. They were kept under strict surveillance in Black's rooms, and at midnight the detective inspector and the constable went out and waited on the landing.

"The two policemen were weary and skeptical, and as the hour they had granted crawled by, only the cold and their hard upright chairs kept them awake. Beyond the door all seemed quiet; once they tried it and found it had been locked on the inside. For a moment they suspected an attempted escape, but then were reassured by the low murmuring of two voices.

"At a quarter to two there was a terrible moan, a piercing cry, a crash. They hurled themselves against the stout oak door but barely shook it. All at once they heard the sound of the key turning, and stood back. A hinge creaked, and in the doorway was a tall gaunt figure in a gown, outlined by the firelight beyond. The two men tackled it but it shook them off with a terrible strength, and rushed past them and down the staircase like some monstrous evil-smelling bat.

"The stalwart band of policemen in the quadrangle overpowered and handcuffed the wild creature, and locked it, still fighting and howling obscure obscenities, in the back of the Black Maria.

"On the floor of the study by the fireplace lay two huddled figures. First aid was brought, a doctor was called, but adrenalin injections did not rouse them. White died without coming out of coma: it was as if his soul had been sucked out of him. Black's faint pulse continued, and soon after dawn he opened his eyes. 'It was too soon. No time to recharge,' was all he said.

"And inside the police van? The commotion ceased suddenly on the way to the station. The constable in the passenger seat looked through the grille and saw what he described afterwards as a 'gray man' slumped on the bench—'gray and shiny like dirty glass, sir. We pulled in to the side of the road and opened up the

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back, and all there was were the handcuffs. They were still locked, sir.' "

In the common room there was a general letting go of breath.

"Excellent," said Littlemount, rising and stretching. "It illustrates your tenets very well—and I promise solemnly not to tamper with the molecular structure of ghosts, should I ever get the opportunity to do so."

Nervous laughter and movement and the drawing back of curtains on the pale first light. Thank-yous and goodbyes were said, and soon the common room was empty—except for myself and the teller of tales. "And you are Black," I said.

"Yes. I guessed you knew. I have come to revisit my old rooms. The College has very kindly agreed to my writing up the materialization theory for *Mind*. Needless to say, I changed my name long ago; they have no idea I was involved in the case, which was hushed up, of course."

"Are you really going to try to bring White back?"

"Yes, indeed. It is the least I can do in an attempt to expiate my guilt—and the only way I can ask his forgiveness."

"And you know he will be there—'something unfinished,' I think you said, 'something still to do.' "

"Yes, he will be there. It is for him I shall call, and hope it is he who comes. Of course, I may achieve nothing alone, in spite of the years between I have spent in developing my 'current'—"

I heard myself offering assistance. "My gift is not much," I said, "but at least I can help bear the strain, help complete the circuit."

He has accepted, although reluctantly. We shall attempt the materialization tonight. I hope we succeed in raising poor young White, and not the old Victorian bat. I set this down more to kill the hours of waiting than as any form of testament. Now it seems a little melodramatic; it will no doubt be an embarrassment to me when I reread it tomorrow morning.

The whole idea is mad, and so is "Black" himself; and I shall seal this lest anyone read it in my absence; I would never hear the last of it! But I am superstitious enough to write: *To be opened in the event of my demise.* I believe one calls it hedging one's bets.

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a *NEW* Superintendent Minter story by
EDGAR WALLACE

The Sooper—Superintendent Minter of Scotland Yard—tells another tale out of his busy professional life. The trouble with most criminals, according to the Sooper, is they've got no originality. Each has his own modus operandi, and he sticks to it. Now, Nippy—acronym for Norman Ignatius Percival Philipson Young—was an exception to the rule. He'd try anything once. . .

WARM AND DRY

by EDGAR WALLACE

I went down to see Superintendent Minter just before the election began. He heard I was going to participate in the fray with a visible sneer on his homely face. "Politics!" he said. "Good Lord! At your time of life! Well, well, well! I've known a lot of fellows who took up that game, but nobody that ever made it pay, except Nippy the Nose, who used to travel the country and burgle the candidates' rooms when they were out addressing meetings.

"You know a lot about the hooks and the getabits of life, and you know that they're all specialists. If a man's a lob crawler—"

"What's a lob crawler? I've forgotten."

The Superintendent shook his head sadly. "You're forgetting everything," he said. "I suppose it's these politics. A lob crawler's a man who goes into a little shop on his hands and knees, passes round the counter, and pinches the till. There's not much of it nowadays, and anyway in these bad times there's nothing in the till to pinch.

"But once a lob crawler, always a lob crawler. If you go on the whizz—and I don't suppose you want me to tell you that whizzing is pocket-picking—you spend your life on the whizz. If you're a burglar, you're always a burglar. I've never yet met a burglar who was also a con man.

"That's the criminal's trouble—he's got no originality, and thank the Lord for it! If they didn't catch themselves, we'd never

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catch 'em. Nippy was an exception. He'd try anything once. If you went into the Record Office at Scotland Yard and turned up his M.O. card, which means—"

"I know what a *modus operandi* card is," I said.

The Superintendent nodded his head approvingly.

"That's right. Don't let these politics put business out of your mind. As I say, if you turned up his M.O. card you'd have a shock. He's been convicted of larceny, burglary, obtaining money by a trick, pocket-picking, luggage pinching—everything except blackmail. It's a funny thing that none of the regulars will ever admit they've committed blackmail, and there's not one of them that wouldn't if he had the chance.

"I used to know Nippy—in fact, I got two of his convictions. Nothing upsets a police officer more than these general practitioners, because we are always looking for specialists. We know there are about six classes of burglars. There's a class that never attempts to break into a live shop, by which I mean a shop where people are living in the rooms upstairs; and there's a class that never goes into a dead joint, which, you will remember, is a lock-up shop with nobody on the premises.

"And naturally, when we get a burglary with any peculiar features, we go through the M.O. cards and pick out a dozen men who are likely to have done the job, and after we've sorted 'em out and found which of 'em are in stir and which of 'em are out of the neighborhood, we'll pull in the remainder one by one and give them the once-over.

"So that when there was a real big bust in Brockley, and we went over the M.O. cards, we never dreamed of looking for Nippy, because he hadn't done that sort of thing before; and we wouldn't have found him, but we got the office from a fence in Islington that Nippy had tried to sell him a diamond brooch. When you get a squeak from a fence it's because he has offered too low a price for the stolen property, and the thief has taken it elsewhere.

"Nippy got a stretch, and the next time he came into our hands it was for something altogether different—trying to persuade a Manchester cotton man to buy a one-tenth share in a Mexican oil field. Nippy would have got away with the loot, but unfortunately he knew nothing about geography, and when he said that Mexico was in South Africa the cotton man got a little suspicious and looked up the map.

"Nippy was a nice fellow, always affable, generally well-

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dressed, and a great favorite with the ladies. When I say 'ladies' I mean anybody that wore stockings and used lipstick.

"Nippy used to do a bit of nosing, too, but I didn't know he was making a regular business of it. Now, a nose is a very useful fellow. Without a nose the police wouldn't be able to find half the criminals that come through their hands. I suppose I'm being vulgar and ought to call them police informers, but 'nose' has always been good enough for me, because, naturally, I'm a man without any refinement.

"I happened to be walking down Piccadilly towards Hyde Park Corner one day when I saw Nippy. He tipped his hat and was moving on when I claimed him. "Good morning, Sooper," he said. "I'm just on me way to the office. I'm going straight now. I'm an agent, you see, and everything's warm and dry. I've opened a little business in Wardour Street," he said.

"Nippy had opened lots of businesses, mostly with a chisel and a three-piece jimmy, but I gathered that he had opened this one by paying the rent in advance. All criminals tell you they're going straight. Usually they're going straight from one prison to another. There are exceptions, but I've never heard of 'em.

"We had a few minutes' conversation. He told me where his office was, and I promised to look him up. He was so happy about me calling that I thought he was lying, but when I dropped in a few days afterwards I found that he had a room on the third floor.

"I expected to find that he was the managing director of the Mountains in the Moon Exploration Company, or else the secretary of a new invention for getting gold out of the sea. It was a bit surprising to find his real name, Norman Ignatius Percival Philipson Young, on the glass panel. It was now that I found what he was agent for. He was standing in with the very fence who had given him away on his last conviction, and I suspected he was doing the same job.

"Anyway, he was full of information about various people, and he gave me a tip that afternoon to prove his—what's the phrase? yes, *bona fides*—that's French, isn't it? I made a pretty good capture—a man called Juggy Jones, who did a lot of automobile pinching, and was in with a big crowd up at Shadwell, who took the cars, repaired them, and shipped them off to India. There's many a grand family car running round Madras, loaded to the waterline with little Eurasians.

"Anyway, Juggy was a very sensible man, and if ever a thief

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could be described as intelligent, Juggy was that man. He didn't talk much. He was a big fellow, about six feet two, with a face as cheerful as the ace of spades. But if he didn't say much he did a lot of thinking.

"I took him out of a cafe, where he was having dinner with a lady friend, and we walked down to the station together and I charged him. He said nothing, but when he came up before the magistrate and heard the evidence and was committed for trial, he asked me to see him in his cell.

" 'I shouldn't be at all surprised, Sooper,' he said, 'if I know the name of the man who shopped me.'

" 'And I shouldn't be surprised either, Juggy,' I said, 'because you've known me for years.'

"But he shook his head and said nothing else. Somebody got at the witnesses for the Crown, and when they went into the box at the Old Bailey they gave the sort of evidence that wouldn't bring about a conviction, and it looked as if he was going to get an acquittal and something out of the poor box to compensate him for his wounded feelings, when the prosecuting counsel took a pretty strong line with one witness who, after he had changed his evidence three times, said just enough to convict Juggy on one count.

"He went down for a carpet. Am I being vulgar? Let me say he went down for six months, and a very lucky man he was. If we could have convicted him on the other indictments he'd have taken a dose of penal servitude. Naturally Nippy didn't appear in court, and I wondered what he was getting out of it.

"It was a long time afterwards that I found out there was a quarrel between the two rings as to who the stuff should be shipped to, and Nippy had been put in to make the killing. Nippy gave me one of two bits of information which were useful, but you could see that he was just acting for the fence. I made a few inquiries up Islington way, and I found out that whenever the police went to him to find out about stolen property, he referred them to the gentleman in Wardour Street who'd be able to tell them something.

"Now a thief who's earning a regular living has never got enough money, and I was pretty certain Nippy was doing something on the side, because he began to have his old prosperous look and started attending the races. As a matter of fact, though I didn't know it, he was working up a connection with a gang of luggage thieves. I found this out when he came on to my

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manor—into my division, I mean. I found him at a railway station acting in a suspicious manner, and I could have pinched him but, being naturally very kind-hearted with all criminals if I haven't enough evidence to get a conviction, I just warned him. Nippy was very hurt.

" 'Why, Sooper,' he said, 'I've got a good job. I'm warm and dry up in Wardour Street. Why should I lower myself to go back to my old sinful life? I haven't had a drink for three months, and I never pass the Old Bailey without taking off me hat to it.'

" 'There are two ways of being warm and dry, Nippy,' I said. 'One is to be honest, and the other is to get to Dartmoor, where I understand there is a fine system of central heating.'

"While this was going on, Juggy Jones came out of stir and reported to me. He'd got out with his usual remissions and I had a little chat with him.

" 'It's all right, Sooper,' he said. 'I'm going straight. I've had enough of the other game. How's Nippy—warm and dry?'

" 'Do you know him?' I asked.

"He thought a long time. 'I've heard about him,' he said.

"I should imagine he'd been doing a lot of thinking while he was in prison, and when I heard that he and Nippy had been seen together having a drink in the long bar, I thought it advisable to see Nippy and give him a few words of fatherly advice. But you couldn't tell anything to Nippy. He knew it all, and a lot more. He just smiled. 'Thank you, Sooper,' he said, 'but Juggy and I have always been good pals, and you couldn't wish to meet a nicer man.'

"According to his story, they had met by accident in the Haymarket. They'd had a drink together. I think Nippy was a bit jealous of Juggy, because he was one of the few crooks I have met who had saved money. He had enough money, anyway, when he was at the Old Bailey to engage a good mouthpiece, and he'd got a nice little flat in Maida Vale.

"One of my men shadowed Nippy and found he was in the habit of calling there, so if Nippy disappeared and his right ear was found on the Thames Embankment, I knew where the rest of the body would be. Not that crooks are that kind—they never commit murder.

"I only heard the rest of the story in scraps and pieces. But so far as I could make out, Nippy had been trying to get the man into the luggage crowd, which was silly because, as I have said

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before, a man who knocks off automobiles doesn't knock off anything else.

"Juggy said he would like to try the business, and he must have looked it over pretty thoroughly and taken an interest in it because one day he sent for Nippy to come to his flat and put him on an easy job that came off and brought him about £150

"It's a simple trick. You have a car outside the station, and in it a little hand stamp and a case of type. You hang about the cloakroom till you see a man coming along carrying a bag in and taking his ticket. You've got a little bag of your own, containing a few well-worn bricks wrapped up in your favorite newspaper. You edge up behind him, and when he takes a ticket you check your bag and you receive a ticket. Now, suppose you receive Number 431. You know the ticket just before you was 430.

"You go outside to your little car. You have got a lot of blank tickets of all colors—they sometimes change the color—and you just make up the stamp to Number 430 and you stamp it. About three or four hours later along comes a gentlemanly-looking person, hands in the phony ticket Number 430 and claims the bag, and that's the end of it.

"One night, just as Nippy was going to bed, Juggy rang him up and asked him to come round to see him. When he got to the flat he told Nippy a grand story. It was about a man who traveled in jewelry and who was in the habit of taking one over the eight, and sometimes two. This fellow, according to Juggy, when he felt the inebriation, if you'll excuse the word, overtaking him, used to go to the nearest cloakroom and deposit all his samples in a bag which was kept in a case that you could open with a blunt knife or a celluloid card.

"According to Juggy, this fellow was coming to London from Birmingham, and the two arranged to shadow him. They picked him up at a railway station—a large fat man, who was slightly oiled. You may not have heard the expression before, but it means a man who has been lubricating—which is also a foreign expression, but you must go with the times.

"They tailed him till he went into a restaurant and met another man. He carried a bag, and he took out of this bag, and showed to the world, a large leather roll which he opened on the table. There were more diamonds in that roll than Nippy had ever heard of. When he saw it he began to breathe heavily through his nose.

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"When they got outside the restaurant Nippy said to Juggy, 'Can't we get him in a quiet place and convert him to free trade? It's warm and dry.'

"But Juggy wouldn't have it. He said that this man, because he was in the habit of getting soused—which is another expression you may not have heard before, but it means the same thing—was always followed by a detective to watch him. Apparently, he wasn't an ordinary traveler—he was the head of the firm.

"So Nippy and Juggy followed him for a bit. He went into a bar and when he came out he couldn't have driven a car without having his license suspended for ten years. Sure enough he made for a railway station in the Euston Road, handed over the stock, and they watched it being locked in the safe.

" 'He'll do that every day this week,' said Juggy, 'but no time's like the present. You're a peterman, I'm not.'

"And then he told Nippy his plan. It was to put him in a packing case and deposit him in the cloakroom. 'It's Saturday night. They close the office at twelve, and all you've got to do is to get out during the night, open the safe, get the stuff, and I'll be down to collect you in the morning.'

"Nippy wasn't what I might describe as keen on the job, but he'd seen the diamonds and he couldn't keep his mind off them. Juggy took him down to a little garage off the Waterloo Bridge Road and showed him the packing case he'd had made.

" 'If you don't like to do it, I can get one of my lads who'll do the job for a pony and be glad of the chance. It's going to be easy to get, and we'll share fifty-fifty.'

"Nippy was still a bit uncertain. 'Suppose they put me upside-down?'

" 'Don't be silly,' said Juggy. 'I'll put a label on it: *This Side Up—Glass.*'

"Nippy had a look at the case. It was all lined, there was a nice seat, and although it was going to be a little uncomfortable there was a neat little pocket inside, with a flask of whiskey and a little tin of sandwiches.

" 'You won't be able to smoke, of course, but you won't be there more than seven hours. I'll notify the left-luggage people that I'm bringing the case in, and I'll slip the fellow a dollar and tell him not to put anything on top. All you've got to do is open the side of the case and step out. It'll be like falling off a log.'

"Nippy had a good look at the case. The side opened like a door.

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It didn't look hard at all. The only danger was that when they came in the morning to the cloakroom they'd find out that the safe had been opened.

" 'That's all right,' said Juggy. 'You needn't bust it. I've got a squeeze of the key.' He took it out of his pocket.

" 'That's all right,' said Nippy. 'It's an easy job. We'll be warm and dry on this.'

"About seven o'clock that night Nippy got inside the packing case and tried it out. The air holes all worked beautifully, so everything was as the heart could desire. He bolted the door on the inside, then heard somebody putting in screws on the outside.

" 'Hi!' said Nippy, 'what's the idea?'

" 'It's all right,' said Juggy. 'They're only fakes. They come out the moment you push the side out.'

"I don't know what happened to Nippy in the night, and I can't describe his feelings, because I'm not a novel writer. He heard cranes going and people shouting, felt himself lifted up in the air, heard somebody say, 'Lower away!' and he went down farther than he thought it was possible to go. And then Nippy began to realize that something had to be done.

"It was two hours before anybody heard his shouts, and at last the stevedores broke open the case and got him out. He was in the hold of a ship, and the packing case was labeled on the top: *Bombay. Stow away from boilers. Keep warm and dry.*

"It broke Nippy's nerve. He's in Parkhurst now, recuperating."

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a NEW short story by

LIKA VAN NESS

Julia and Charles had passed each other several times in the hall of the apartment house, but their first real meeting was at two o'clock in the morning . . .

NIGHT FEAR

by LIKA VAN NESS

The rapping on the door was firm and insistent. Julia turned on the light by the daybed, rubbed hard at her eyes, and went to the door. "Who is it?" she whispered fearfully.

"It's your neighbor across the hall, Charles Slaughter. Are you all right?"

Julia methodically undid each of the three locks and, keeping the chain on the guard, opened the door a few inches. The man facing her, serious and concerned, was the one she had seen entering and leaving the opposite apartment several times since she and her mother had moved in the previous month.

"I'm all right," she said drowsily. "What's the matter? Is there a fire?"

"I heard screaming."

"Screaming!" she said. "Oh, not from here."

"Yes, absolutely from here. When I first heard it I came out into the hallway—it definitely came from behind this door."

"Oh." Julia bit her lip and looked down at her hand on the doorknob.

"There *is* something wrong. Can I be of help?"

Julia blinked and looked back toward the living room for a tissue. "It's nothing," she said. "No. I don't know."

"Let me come in and talk with you for a few minutes. I'm harmless, I promise you, and maybe I can be of help."

Julia paused to reflect for a few seconds, then drew the head of

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the chain across and off the guard. She stepped back and her neighbor, a sturdy man in a neat dressing gown and slippers, stepped inside and appraised the dimly lit room, the mussed daybed in the corner, the heavy, overstuffed, oppressive furniture.

Julia shut the door behind him and refastened all three locks with metallic-sounding efficiency. "Everything is all right, you see?" she said, turning to him. She walked to the kitchen to the left and turned on the light. Taking a tissue from a box on the counter, she blew her nose. "Excuse me," she said.

"But don't you live here with an older woman? I assumed she was your mother. Perhaps she—"

"If she screamed I would have heard her. She sleeps in this bedroom here off the kitchen. Just across from me. She's deaf and might not hear me if I screamed, but I would hear her."

He hesitated. "Don't you want to check and see if she's all right? There might have been an intruder."

"The only way an intruder could enter this apartment is from the fire escape back there by the living-room window. He'd have to pass me to get to her." She turned on the gas under the kettle on a back burner. "You don't believe me that I would have heard her if she'd screamed."

"I'm just concerned. I didn't imagine the screaming and if it wasn't you, then it had to be her."

"Then it must have been me." She sighed. "If I go in and check on my mother, it will wake her. She is deaf, but she's a very light sleeper." Julia opened a cabinet door and reached toward the cups and saucers. "I'm making a cup of tea. Will you have one?"

"I will," he said. "Thank you."

They sat in the worn chairs by the small bricked-up fireplace. "I must actually call out when I have the dream then," she said. "No one has ever told me so."

"But you did dream you were screaming?"

"Yes. Funny, I haven't had the nightmare for months but here it is again."

"Is it always the same dream?"

"Yes. It's not a dream in the usual sense. It's a classic nightmare, I discovered. I was so frantic when I started having it I read every book I could find on sleep and dreaming—which was easy for me, being a librarian." She smiled and he returned the smile. "It was kind of you to come over," she said.

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"Not at all. Go on, what did you discover about this nightmare?"

"It's called *pavor nocturnus–*"

"Translation?"

"Night fear. It isn't uncommon—it's been traced back for centuries. You feel a heavy presence, a real and evil presence, weighing on you. You can't move. You try to move and you try to call out for help, but you can't."

"Apparently you can."

She studied the tea in her cup. "It's a dreadful feeling. I've read that you are in a state of shock and that if you don't pull yourself out of the dream you die."

"That sounds like a myth—like the one about if you dream you're falling and don't wake up before you land you die."

"The books say it's a fact."

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "Do the books say how the nightmare can be avoided?"

"As a matter of fact, one of them suggested that the circulation of air is important, and I think that's why I haven't had the dream for so long, until tonight. Back home I kept the window open even on the coldest nights."

"If you'll forgive my saying so, it's a bit stuffy in here right now," he said and nodded to the windows at the far end of the room. "Are they open at the top at least?"

"No, they're locked shut because of the fire escape." She searched his face. "Intruders, you know."

"I'm sorry about this nightmare of yours. It must be horrible."

"It is. I take it you've never had one."

"No. I've dreamed I can't walk, but it's nothing like what you describe. Should you—do you think you should—?"

"See a psychiatrist? No, it's physical, not mental." She smiled at him again and once more he returned it. "It has to do with coming awake too swiftly from a deep sleep. The lighter in-between sleep, the dreaming phase, is bypassed and for some reason it results in a state of shock."

"Julia?"

It was a thin voice from beyond the kitchen. The voice came closer and sounded more peevish. "Julia! Why are these lights on?"

"Oh, dear, we've awakened her." Julia placed her cup and saucer on the end table. Charles turned and recognized the frail

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old woman he'd seen several times in the hall. She shuffled a few feet into the room, fitting a hearing aid to her ear with a fumbling hand. She peered toward them, her eyes adjusting to the light. Charles stood up.

When she saw him, her mouth dropped open and her hands clutched the collar of her robe, pulling it closer to her emaciated neck.

"Who are you?" she cried. "Julia, who is this man?"

"He lives across the hall, Mother—there's no need to be alarmed. I apparently called out in my sleep and he thoughtfully came over to investigate."

The old woman stared at Charles with bravado. "I don't recognize you, young man. *You* don't live here!" She faced Julia. "I told you we should never have come here where we don't know anyone. We should have stayed where we were."

"We didn't know anyone there either, Mother." Julia turned weary eyes to Charles. "I'm sorry. You'd better leave. She isn't well."

"Of course," he said, putting his half-empty cup by hers on the table. "I'm relieved to know that you're both all right."

"Thank you very much," she said, following him to the door and freeing it with a clatter. She smiled up at him. "It's good to know we have a neighbor who cares." He stepped out into the hall. "Thank you again," Julia said, "Mr. Slaughter."

He hesitated. "You're courageous, you know—letting an unknown man into your apartment at two in the morning, especially one named Slaughter."

Julia's smile stayed. "I'd trust you with my life, Mr. Slaughter."

It's done, she thought, climbing under the covers, her mother safely back in her own bed and the apartment in darkness again. "How could you put us in danger like this?" her mother had complained when Julia led her back to bed. "I won't let you forget this in a hurry!" Of course she wouldn't. She had never let Julia forget anything.

Her course was clear. Her mother would be a dead weight only a few months longer. She and Julia's father had kept Julia from pursuing a career in medicine, agreeing only to support her through the library school they thought the safest training for her future. They had never allowed her to date or to stay out late and, once she was out of college and working, she had had to account

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for every cent of her wages. They had made it clear she was never to encourage any friendship with a man, no matter how "innocent." All her life they had preached to her about the importance of preparing oneself against life's worst possibilities.

Her father had died after a long tedious illness five years earlier. All that was left after the medical bills were paid was their big old house. And when Julia lost her job at the time the branch of the public library closed and she was unable to find another job, not even in one of the hospitals or universities, she had had to look into the opportunities elsewhere. It had taken eight months, but she finally found a position in this middle-sized community miles from their home.

They had sold the house and moved, with the best of the furniture, to this apartment, which Julia hated every bit as much as her mother did. She hated the suburbs and she hated library work. She was almost 40 years old and every day her face in the bathroom mirror looked older. Life was passing her by because her parents had trained her to prepare for life's worst possibilities, not its best. And life would continue to pass her by so long as the selfish woman in the one bedroom across the kitchen refused to die.

She had many ailments, any one of which might carry her off, doctors told Julia—always adding that then again she might live to be a hundred; it was impossible to predict with these wiry types. Julia's maternal grandmother had lived to be 94.

One hundred! By then Julia herself would be the age her mother was now! No one could expect her to sit by and let that happen. She had to act out of self-preservation.

A nursing home for her mother was out of the question. It would eat up what money was left from the sale of the house, and her mother would behave so badly Julia doubted if any nursing home would keep her. No. Instead, one night, she would firmly press a pillow over her sleeping mother's face and end the old woman's misery—and her own. And although no jury in their souls would convict her, they would have to if they learned the truth. But they wouldn't learn the truth because the dead woman's heart had been weak for years—her doctors would testify to that. They had told Julia she might slip away in her sleep anytime.

And if Julia botched it somehow and her mother did scream—now there was Mr. Slaughter to give evidence that Julia oc-

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casionally cried out in her sleep. It was only remotely possible it would come to that, but Julia felt better knowing that she had prepared for the worst possibility. They had trained her well, her single-minded parents, and for that she was finally grateful.

Before returning to bed, Charles Slaughter lit a cigarette and thought about the women across the hall. Why had the younger one opened that solidly locked door to him, a virtual stranger? Lord, how he hated the harsh sound of those locks they had had installed!

Then too there had been a play-acting quality about it all that just didn't ring true. He didn't know if mother and daughter were both acting toward the same purpose, but acting they were. The daughter especially disturbed him. She aroused his sympathy—and his fear. He would, without a doubt, be hearing from her again. He knew it with a sureness he'd developed in his 16 years as a detective working out of the county district attorney's office.

"Q"

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a NEW suspense story by

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Skipperton was a man accustomed to having his own way —whether it involved a business deal, or acquiring someone else's property, or running his daughter's life. Skip was a hard, tough man who never failed—and he used hard, tough methods to succeed. In such a man's life there were bound to be disagreements, blowups, and inevitably—tragedies . . .

SLOWLY, SLOWLY IN THE WIND

by PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

Edward (Skip) Skipperton spent most of his life in a thunderous rage. It was his nature. He had been full of temper as a boy, and as a man impatient with people's slowness or stupidity or inefficiency. Now Skipperton was 52. His wife had left him two years ago, unable to stand his tantrums any longer. She had met a tranquil university professor from Boston, had divorced Skipperton on the grounds of incompatability, and married the professor. Skipperton had been determined to get custody of their daughter Margaret, then 15, and with clever lawyers and on the grounds that his wife had deserted him for another man, Skipperton had succeeded.

A few months after the divorce, Skipperton had a heart attack, a real stroke with hemi-paralysis from which he miraculously recovered in six months, but his doctors warned him.

"Skip, it's life or death. You quit smoking and drinking and right now, or you're a dead man before your next birthday." That was from his heart specialist.

"You owe it to Margaret," said his G.P. "You ought to retire, Skip. You've plenty of money. You're in the wrong profession for

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your nature—granted you've made a success of it. But what's left of your life is more important, isn't it? Why not become a gentleman farmer, something like that?"

Skipperton was a management advisor. Behind the scenes of big business Skipperton was well-known. He worked as a freelance. Companies on the brink sent for him to reorganize, reform, throw out—anything Skip advised went. "I go in and kick the behind off 'em!" was the inelegant way Skip described his work when he was interviewed, which was not often, because he preferred a ghostly role.

Skipperton bought Coldstream Heights in Maine, a seven-acre farm with a modernized farmhouse, and hired a local man named Andy Humbert to live and work on the place. Skipperton also bought some of the machinery from the former owner, but not all of it, because he didn't want to turn himself into a full-time farmer.

The doctors had recommended a little exercise, but no strain of any kind. They had known that Skip wouldn't and couldn't cut all his connections with the businesses he had helped in the past. He might have to make an occasional trip to Chicago or Dallas, but officially he was retired.

Margaret was transferred from her private school in New York to a Swiss boarding school. Skipperton knew and liked Switzerland, and had bank accounts there.

Skipperton did stop drinking and smoking. His doctors were amazed at his will power—and yet it was just like Skip to stop drinking and smoking overnight, like a soldier. Now Skip chewed his pipes, and bit through a stem in a week. He went through two lower teeth, but got them capped in steel in Bangor.

Skipperton and Andy kept a couple of goats to crop the grass, and one sow who was pregnant when Skip bought her, and who now had twelve piglets. Margaret wrote filial letters saying she liked Switzerland and that her French was improving no end. Skipperton now wore flannel shirts with no tie, low boots that laced, and woodsmen's jackets. His appetite had improved, and he had to admit he felt better.

The only thorn in his side—and Skipperton had to have one to feel normal—was the man who owned some adjacent land, one Peter Frosby, who wouldn't sell a stretch Skipperton offered to buy at three times the market price. This land sloped down to a little river called the Coldstream, which in fact separated part of

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Skipperton's property from Frosby's to the north, and Skipperton didn't mind that. He was interested in the part of the river nearest him and in view from Coldstream Heights.

Skipperton wanted to be able to fish a little, to be able to say he owned that part of the landscape and had riparian rights. But old Frosby didn't want anybody fishing in his stream, Skipperton had been told by the agents, even though Frosby's house was upstream and out of sight of Skipperton's.

The week after Peter Frosby's rejection, Skipperton invited Frosby to his house. "Just to get acquainted—as neighbors," Skipperton said on the telephone to Frosby. By now Skipperton had been living at Coldstream Heights for four months.

Skipperton had on hand his best whiskey and brandy, cigars and cigarettes—all the things he couldn't enjoy himself—when Frosby arrived in a dusty but new Cadillac, driven by a young man whom Frosby introduced as his son Peter.

"The Frosbys don't sell their land," Frosby told Skipperton. "We've had the same land for nearly three hundred years, and the river's always been ours." Frosby, a skinny but strong-looking man with cold gray eyes, puffed his cigar daintily and after ten minutes hadn't finished his first whiskey. "Can't see why you want it."

"A little fishing," Skipperton said, putting on a pleasant smile. "It's in view of my house. Just to be able to wade, maybe, in the summer."

Skipperton looked at Peter Junior, who sat with folded arms beside and behind his father. Skipperton was backed only by shambly Andy, a good enough handyman, but not part of his dynasty. Skipperton would have given anything—except his life—to have been holding a straight whiskey in one hand and a good cigar in the other.

"Well, I'm sorry," Skipperton said finally. "But I think you'll agree the price I offer isn't bad—twenty thousand cash for about two hundred yards of riparian rights. Doubt if you'll get it again—in your lifetime."

"Not interested in my lifetime," Frosby said with a faint smile. "I've got a son here."

The son was a handsome boy with dark hair and sturdy shoulders, taller than his father. His arms were still folded across his chest, as if to illustrate his father's negative attitude. He had unbent only briefly to light a cigarette which he had soon put out.

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Still, Peter Junior smiled as he and his father were leaving, and said, "Nice job you've done with the Heights, Mr. Skipperton. Looks better than it did before."

"Thank you," Skip said, pleased. He had installed good leather-upholstered furniture, heavy floor-length curtains, and brass firedogs and tongs for the fireplace.

"Nice old-fashioned touches," Frosby commented in what seemed to Skipperton a balance between compliment and sneer. "We haven't seen a scarecrow around here in maybe—almost before my time, I think."

"I like old-fashioned things—like fishing," Skipperton said. "I'm trying to grow corn out there. Somebody told me the land was all right for corn. That's where a scarecrow belongs, isn't it? In a cornfield?"

He put on as friendly a manner as he could, but his blood was boiling. A mule-stubborn Maine man, Frosby, sitting on several hundred acres that his more forceful ancestors had acquired for him.

Frosby Junior was peering at a photograph of Maggie, which stood in a silver frame on the hall table. She had been only 13 or 14 when the picture had been taken, but her slender face framed in long dark hair showed the clean-cut nose and brows, the subtle smile that would turn her into a beauty one day. Maggie was nearly 18 now, and Skip's expectations of her beauty were being confirmed.

"Pretty girl," said Frosby Junior, turning toward Skipperton, then glancing at his father, because they were all lingering in the hall.

Skipperton said nothing. The meeting had been a failure, and Skipperton wasn't used to failures. He looked into Frosby's greenish-gray eyes and said, "I've one more idea. Suppose we make an arrangement that I rent the land for the duration of my life, and then it goes back to you—or your son. I'll give you five thousand a year. Want to think it over?"

Frosby put on another frosty smile. "I think not, Mr. Skipperton. Thanks anyway."

"You might talk to your lawyer about it. No rush on my part."

Frosby chuckled. "We know as much about law as the lawyers here. We know our boundaries anyway. Nice to meet you, Mr. Skipperton. Thank you for the whiskey and—goodbye."

No one shook hands. The Cadillac moved off.

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"Damn the jerk," Skipperton muttered to Andy, but he smiled. Life was a game, after all. You won sometimes, you lost sometimes.

It was early May. The corn was in, and Skipperton had spotted three or four strong green shoots coming through the beige, well-turned earth. That pleased him, made him think of American Indians, the ancient Mayans. Corn! And he had a classic scarecrow that he and Andy had knocked together a couple of weeks ago. They had dressed the crossbars in an old jacket, and the two sticks—nailed to the upright—in brown trousers. Skip had found the old clothes in the attic. A straw hat jammed onto the top and secured with a nail completed the picture.

Skip went off to San Francisco for a five-day assignment for an aeronautics firm which was crippled by a lawsuit and scared to death by unions and contract pullouts. Skip left them with three vice-presidents fired, but in better financial shape, and collected a $50,000 fee for his work.

By way of celebrating his achievement and the oncoming summer that would bring Maggie, Skip shot one of Frosby's hunting dogs which had swum the stream onto Skip's property to retrieve a bird. Skipperton had been waiting patiently at his bedroom window upstairs, knowing a shoot was on from the sound of guns. He had his binoculars and a rifle of goodly range. Let Frosby complain! Trespassing was trespassing.

Skip was almost pleased when Frosby took him to court over the dog. Andy had buried the dog, on Skipperton's orders, but Skipperton readily admitted the shooting. And the judge ruled in Skipperton's favor.

Frosby went pale with anger. "It may be the law but it's not human. It's not fair."

And a lot of good it did Frosby to say that!

Skipperton's corn grew high as the scarecrow's hips, and higher. Skip spent a lot of time up in his bedroom, binoculars and loaded rifle at hand, in case anything else belonging to Frosby showed up on his land.

"Don't hit me," Andy said with an uneasy laugh. "You're shooting on the edge of the cornfield there, and now and then I weed it, y'know."

"You think there's something wrong with my eyesight?" Skip replied.

A few days later Skip proved there was nothing wrong with his

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eyesight, when he plugged a gray cat stalking a bird or a field mouse in the high grass this side of the stream. Skip did it with one shot. He wasn't even sure the cat belonged to Frosby.

This shot produced a call in person from Frosby Junior the following day.

"It's just to ask a question, Mr. Skipperton. My father and I heard a shot yesterday, and last night one of our cats didn't come back at night to eat, and not this morning either. Do you know anything about that?" Frosby Junior had declined to take a seat.

"I shot the cat. It was on my property," Skipperton said calmly.

"But a cat—what harm was the cat doing?" The young man looked steadily at Skipperton.

"The law is the law. Property is property."

Frosby Junior shook his head. "You're a hard man, Mr. Skipperton." Then he departed.

Peter Frosby served a summons again, and the same judge ruled that in accordance with old English law and also American law, a cat was a rover by nature, not subject to constraint as was a dog. He gave Skipperton the maximum fine of $100, and a warning not to use his rifle so freely in the future.

That annoyed Skipperton, though of course he could and did laugh at the smallness of the fine. If he could think of something else, something really *telling*, old Frosby might relent and at least rent some of the stream, Skip thought.

But he forgot the feud when Margaret came. Skip fetched her at the airport in New York, and they drove up to Maine. She looked taller to Skip, more filled out, and there were roses in her cheeks. She was a beauty, all right!

"Got a surprise for you at home," Skip said.

"Um-m—a horse maybe? I told you I learned to jump this year, didn't I?"

Had she? Skip said, "Yes. Not a horse, no."

Skip's surprise was a red sports car. He had remembered at least that Maggie's school had taught her to drive. She was thrilled, and flung her arms around Skip's neck.

"You're a darling, Daddy! And you know, you're looking *very* well!"

By Easter, Margaret had been to Colstream Heights for two weeks, but now the place looked more cared for. She and Skip had arrived around midnight, but Andy was still up watching television in his own little house on the grounds, and Maggie insisted

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on going over to greet him. Skip was gratified to see Andy's eyes widen at the sight of her.

Skip and Maggie tried out the new car the next day. They drove to a town 20 miles away and had lunch. That afternoon, back at the house, Maggie asked if her father had a fishing rod, just a simple one, so she could try the stream. Skip of course had all kinds of rods, but he had to tell her she couldn't fish, and he explained why, and that he had even tried to rent part of the stream.

"Frosby's a real mule," Skip said. "Won't give an inch."

"Well, never mind, Daddy. There's lots else to do."

Maggie was the kind of girl who enjoyed taking walks, reading, or fussing around in the house rearranging little things so they would look prettier. She did these things while Skip was on the telephone sometimes for an hour or so with Dallas or Detroit.

Skipperton was a bit surprised one day when Maggie arrived in her car around seven p.m. with a catch of three trout on a string. She was barefoot, and the cuffs of her blue dungarees were damp. "Where'd you get those?" Skip asked, his first thought being that she'd taken one of his rods and fished the stream against his instructions.

"I met the boy who lives there," Maggie said. "We were both buying gas, and he introduced himself—said he'd seen my photograph in this house. Then we had a coffee in the diner there by the gas station—"

"The Frosby boy?"

"Yes. He's awfully nice, Daddy. Maybe it's only the father who's not nice. Anyway Pete said, 'Come on and fish with me this afternoon,' so I did. He said his father stocks the river farther up."

"I don't—frankly, Maggie, I *don't* want you associating with the Frosbys!"

"There are only two." Maggie was puzzled. "I barely met his father. They've got quite a nice house, Daddy."

"I've had unpleasant dealings with old Frosby, as I told you, Maggie. It just isn't fitting if you get chummy with the son. Do me this one favor this summer, Maggie doll." That was his name for her in the moments he wanted to feel close to her, wanted her to feel close to him.

Maggie was silent for a few seconds. Then she said, "All right, Daddy."

The next day Maggie was gone from the house for nearly three

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hours, and Skip noticed it. She had said she wanted to go to the village to buy sneakers, and she was wearing the sneakers when she came home, but Skip wondered why it had taken her three hours to make a five-mile trip. With enormous effort Skip refrained from asking a question. Then Saturday morning Maggie said there was a dance in Keensport, and she was going.

"And I have a suspicion who you're going with," Skip said, his heart beginning to thump with adrenalin.

"I'm going alone, I swear it, Daddy. Girls don't have to be escorted any more. I could go in blue jeans, but I'm not. I've got some white slacks."

Skipperton realized that he could hardly forbid her to go to a dance, even alone. But he damn well knew the Frosby boy would be there, and would probably meet Maggie at the entrance. "I'll be glad when you go back to Switzerland."

Skip knew what was going to heppen. He could see it a mile away. His daughter was infatuated, and he could only hope that she got over it, that nothing happened before she had to go back to school in another month, because he didn't want to keep her prisoner in the house. He didn't want to look absurd in his own eyes, even in simpleminded Andy's eyes, by laying down the law to her.

Maggie got home very late that night, and so quietly that Skip hadn't wakened, though he had stayed up till two a.m. and meant to listen for her. At breakfast Maggie looked fresh and radiant, rather to Skip's surprise.

"I suppose the Frosby boy was at the dance last night?"

Maggie, diving into bacon and eggs, said, "I don't know what you've got against him, Daddy—just because his father didn't want to sell land that's been in their family for ages."

"I don't want you to fall in love with a country bumpkin! I've sent you to a good school. You've got background—or at least I intend to give you some!"

"Did you know Pete had three years at Harvard—and he's taking a correspondence course in electronic engineering?"

"Oh! I suppose he's learning computer programming? Easier than shorthand!"

Maggie stood up. "I'll be eighteen in another month, Daddy. I don't want to be told whom I can see and can't see."

Skip got up too and roared at her. "They're not my kind of people or yours!"

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Maggie left the room.

In the next few days Skipperton fumed and went through three pipestems. Andy noticed his unease, Skipperton knew, but Andy made no comment. Andy spent his nonworking hours alone, watching drivel on his television. Skip was rehearsing a speech to Maggie as he paced his land, glancing at the sow and piglets, at Andy's neat kitchen garden, not seeing anything. Skip was groping for a lever, the kind of weapon he had always been able to find in business affairs that would force this his way.

He couldn't send Maggie back to Switzerland, even though her school stayed open in summer for girls whose homes were too far away to go back to. If he threatened not to send her back to school, he was afraid Maggie wouldn't mind. Skipperton maintained an apartment in New York, and had two servants who slept in, but he knew Maggie wouldn't agree to go there, and Skip didn't want to go to New York either. He was too interested in the immediate scene in which he sensed a battle coming.

Skipperton had arrived at nothing by the following Saturday, a week after the Keensport dance, and he was exhausted. That Saturday evening Maggie said she was going to a party at the house of someone called Wilmers, whom she had met at the dance. Skip asked her for the address, and Maggie scribbled it on the hall telephone pad. Skip had reason to have asked for it, because by Sunday morning Maggie hadn't come home. Skip was up at seven, nervous as a cat and still in a rage at nine a.m., which he thought a polite enough hour to telephone on a Sunday morning, though it had cost him much to wait that long.

An adolescent boy's voice said that Maggie had been there, yes, but she had left pretty early.

"Was she alone?"

"No, she was with Pete Frosby."

"That's all I wanted to know," said Skip, feeling the blood rush to his face as if he were hemorrhaging. "Oh! Wait! Do you know where they went?"

"Sure don't."

"My daughter went in her car?"

"No, Pete's. Maggie's car is still here."

Skip thanked the boy and put the phone down shakily, but he was shaking only from energy that was surging through every nerve and muscle. He picked up the telephone and dialed the Frosby home.

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Old Frosby answered.

Skipperton identified himself, and asked if his daughter was there.

"No, she's not, Mr. Skipperton."

"Is your son there? I'd like—"

"No, he doesn't happen to be in just now."

"What do you mean? He was there and went out?"

"Mr. Skipperton, my son has his own ways, his own room, his own key—his own life. I'm not about—"

Skipperton put the telephone down suddenly. He had a bad nosebleed, and it was dripping onto the table edge. He ran to get a wet towel.

Maggie was not home by Sunday evening or Monday morning, and Skipperton was reluctant to notify the police, appalled by the thought that her name might be linked with the Frosbys', if the police found her with the son somewhere. Tuesday morning Skip was enlightened. He had a letter from Maggie, written from Boston. It said that she and Peter had run away to be married, and to avoid "unpleasant scenes."

> ". . . Though you may think this is sudden, we do love each other and are sure of it. I did not really want to go back to school, Daddy. I will be in touch in about a week. Please don't try to find me. I have seen Mommie, but we are not staying with her.
>
> Love always,
> Maggie"

For two days Skipperton didn't go out of the house, and hardly ate. He felt three-quarters dead. Andy was very worried about him, and finally persuaded Skipperton to ride to the village with him, because they needed to buy a few things. Skipperton went, sitting like an upright corpse in the passenger seat.

While Andy went to the drugstore and the butcher's, Skipperton sat in the car, his eyes glazed with his own thoughts. Then an approaching figure on the sidewalk made Skipperton's eyes focus. Old Frosby! Frosby walked with a sprightly tread for his age, Skip thought. He wore a new tweed suit, a black felt hat, and he had a cigar in his hand. Skipperton hoped Frosby wouldn't see him in the car, but Frosby did.

Frosby didn't pause in his stride, just smiled his obnoxious, thin-lipped little smile and nodded briefly, as if to say—

Well, Skip *knew* what Frosby might have wanted to say, what

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he had said with that filthy smile. Skip's blood seethed, and he began to feel like his old self again. He was standing on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets and feet apart, when Andy reappeared.

"What's for dinner tonight, Andy? I've got an appetite!"

That evening Skipperton persuaded Andy to take not only Saturday night off, but to stay overnight somewhere, if he wished. "Give you a couple of hundred bucks for a little spree, boy. You've earned it." Skip forced two hundred-dollar bills into Andy's hand. "Take off Monday too, if you feel like it. I'll manage."

Andy left Saturday evening in the pickup for Bangor.

Skip then telephoned old Frosby. Frosby answered, and Skipperton said, "Mr. Frosby, it's time we made a truce, under the circumstances. Don't you think so?"

Frosby sounded surprised, but he agreed to come Sunday morning around eleven for a talk. Frosby arrived in the same Cadillac, alone.

And Skipperton wasted no time. He let Frosby knock, opened the door for him, and as soon as Frosby was inside, Skip came down on his head with a rifle butt. He dragged Frosby to the hall to make sure the job was finished; the hall was uncarpeted, and Skip wanted no blood on the rugs. Vengeance was sweet to Skip, and he almost smiled.

He removed Frosby's clothes, and wrapped his body in some burlap sacks which he had ready. Then he burned Frosby's clothing in the fireplace, where he had a small fire already crackling. Frosby's wrist watch and wallet and two rings Skip put aside in a drawer to deal with later.

He had decided that broad daylight was the best time to carry out his idea, better than night when the beam of a flashlight might have caught someone's eye. He put one arm around Frosby's body and dragged it up the field toward his scarecrow. It was a haul of more than half a mile. Skip had some rope and a knife in his back pockets.

He cut down the old scarecrow, cut the strings that held the clothing to the cross, dressed Frosby in the old trousers and jacket, tied a burlap bag around his head and face, and jammed the hat on him. The hat wouldn't stay without being tied on, so Skip did this after punching holes in the brim of the hat with the point of his knife.

Then Skip picked up his burlap bags and made his way back

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toward his house down the slope, with many a backward look to admire his work, and many a smile. The scarecrow looked almost the same as before. He had solved a problem that a lot of people thought difficult: how to dispose of a body. Furthermore, he could enjoy looking at it through his binoculars from his upstairs window.

Skip burned the burlap bags in his fireplace, made sure that even the soles of the shoes had burned to soft ash. When the ashes were cooler, he'd look for buttons and the belt buckle and remove them. He took a fork, went out beyond the pig run, and buried the wallet (whose papers he had already burned), the wrist watch, and the rings about three feet deep. It was in a patch of stringy grass, unused for anything except by the goats, not a place in which anyone would ever likely do any gardening.

Then Skip washed his face and hands, ate a thick slice of roast beef, and put his mind to the car. It was by now 12:30. Skip didn't know if Frosby had a servant, someone who would expect him for lunch, but it was safer to assume he had. Skip's aversion to Frosby had kept him from asking Maggie any questions about the Frosby household.

Skip got into Frosby's car, now with a kitchen towel in his back pocket to wipe off fingerprints, and drove to some woods he knew from having driven past them many times. An unpaved lane went off the main road into these woods, and into this lane Skip turned. Thank God, nobody was in sight, not a woodsman, not a picnicker. Skip stopped the car and got out, wiped the steering wheel, even the keys, then the door, and then walked back toward the road.

He was more than an hour getting home. He had found a long stick, the kind called a stave by the wayfarers of old, Skip thought, and he trudged along with the air of a nature lover, a bird-watcher, for the benefit of the people in the few cars that passed him. He didn't glance at any of the cars. It was still Sunday dinner time.

The local police telephoned that evening around seven, and asked if they could come by. Skipperton said of course.

He had removed the buttons and buckle from the fireplace ashes. A woman had telephoned around 1:30, saying she was calling from the Frosby residence (Skip assumed she was a servant) to ask if Mr. Frosby was there. Skipperton told her that Mr. Frosby had left his house a little after noon.

"Mr. Frosby intended to go straight home, do you think?" the

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plump policeman asked Skipperton. The policeman had some rank like sergeant, Skipperton supposed, and he was accompanied by a younger officer.

"He didn't say anything about where he was going," Skipperton replied. "And I didn't notice which way his car went."

The policeman nodded, and Skip could see he was on the brink of saying something like, "I understand from Mr. Frosby's housekeeper that you and he were not on the best of terms," but the cop didn't say anything, just looked around Skip's living room, and glanced around his front and back yards in a puzzled way; then both policemen took their leave.

Skip was awakened around midnight by the ring of the telephone at his bedside. It was Maggie calling from Boston. She and Pete had heard about the disappearance of Pete's father.

"Daddy, they said he'd just been to see you this morning. What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I invited him for a friendly talk—and it was friendly. After all, we're fathers-in-law now. Honey, how do I know where he went?"

Skipperton found it surprisingly easy to lie about Frosby. In a primitive way his emotions had judged, weighed the situation, and told Skip that he was right, that he had exacted a just revenge. Old Frosby might have exerted some control over his son, but he hadn't. It had cost Skip his daughter—because that was the way Skip saw it; Maggie was lost to him. He saw her as a mother-to-be of children whose narrow-mindedness, inherited from the Frosby clan, would surely out.

Andy arrived the next morning, Monday. He had already heard the story in the village, and also the police had found Mr. Frosby's car not far away in the woods, Andy said. Skip feigned mild surprise on hearing of the car. Andy didn't ask any questions. And suppose he discovered the scarecrow? Skip thought a generous amount of money would keep Andy quiet. The corn was all picked up there—only a few inferior ears remained, destined for the pigs. Skipperton picked them himself Monday afternoon, while Andy tended the pigs and goats.

Skipperton's pleasure now was to survey the cornfield from his upstairs bedroom with his 10X binoculars. He loved to see the wind tossing the cornstalk tops around old Frosby's corpse, loved to think of him shrinking, drying up like a mummy in the wind. Twisting slowly, slowly in the wind. Frosby wasn't twisting, but

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he was hanging, in plain view. No buzzards came. Skip had been a little afraid of buzzards.

The only thing that bothered him, once, was seeing one afternoon some schoolboys walking along a road far to the right (under which road the Coldstream flowed), and pointing to the scarecrow. Bracing himself against the window jamb, arms held tightly at his sides so the binoculars would be as steady as possible, Skip saw a couple of the small boys laughing. And had one held his nose? Surely not! They were nearly a mile away from the scarecrow! Still, they had paused, and one boy had stamped his foot, another had shaken his head and laughed.

How Skip wished he could hear what they were saying!

Ten days had passed since Frosby's death. Rumors were rife, that old Frosby had been murdered for his money by someone he'd picked up to give a lift to, that he had been kidnaped and that a ransom note might still arrive. But suppose one of the schoolboys said to his father—or anyone—that maybe the dead body of Frosby was inside the scarecrow? This was just the kind of thing Skip might have thought of when he had been a small boy. Skip was consequently more afraid of the schoolboys than of the police.

And the police did come back, with a plainclothes detective. They looked over Skipperton's house and land—maybe looking for a recently dug patch, Skip thought. If so, they found none. They looked at Skip's two rifles and noted down their caliber and serial numbers.

"Just routine, Mr. Skipperton," said the detective.

"I understand," said Skip.

That same evening Maggie telephoned and said she was at the Frosby house, and could she come over to see him?

"Why not? This is your house," Skip replied.

"I never know what kind of mood you'll be in—or temper," Maggie said when she arrived.

"I'm in a pretty *good* mood, I think," Skipperton said. "And I hope you're happy, Maggie—since what's done is done."

Maggie was in her blue dungarees, sneakers, and in a familiar sweater. It was hard for Skip to realize that she was married. She sat with hands folded, looking down at the floor. Then she raised her eyes to him and said, "Pete's very upset. We never would have stayed a week in Boston unless he'd been sure the police were doing all they could here. Was Mr. Frosby—depressed? Pete didn't think so."

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Skip laughed. "No! Best of spirits. Pleased with the marriage and all that." Skip waited, but Maggie was silent. "You're going to live at the Frosby place?"

"Yes." Maggie stood up. "I'd like to collect a few things, Daddy. I brought a suitcase."

His daughter's coolness, her sadness, pained Skip. She had said something about visiting him often, nothing about his coming to see them—not that Skip would have gone.

"I know what's in that scarecrow," said Andy one day, and Skip turned, binoculars in hand, to see Andy standing in the doorway of his bedroom.

"Do you? —And what're you going to do about it?" Skip asked, braced for anything. He had squared his shoulders.

"Nothin'. Nothin'," Andy replied with a smile.

Skip didn't know how to take that. "I suppose you'd like some money, Andy? A little present—for keeping quiet?"

"No, sir," Andy said quietly, shaking his head. His wind-wrinkled face bore a faint smile. "I ain't that kind."

What should Skip make of it? He was used to men who liked money, more and more of it. Andy was different, that was true. Well, so much the better, if he didn't want money, Skip thought. It was cheaper. He also felt he could trust Andy. It was strange.

The leaves began to fall in earnest. Halloween was coming, and Andy removed the driveway gate in advance—just lifted it off its hinges, telling Skip that the kids would steal it if it remained there. Andy knew the district. The kids didn't do much harm, but it was trick or treat at every house. Skip and Andy made sure they had lots of nickels and dimes on hand, as well as corn candy, licorice sticks, and even a couple of pumpkins in the window, faces cut in them by Andy, to show any comers that they were in the right spirit.

Then, on Halloween night, nobody knocked on Skip's door. There was a party at Coldstream, at the Frosbys'—Skip knew because the wind was blowing his way and he could hear the music. He thought of his daughter dancing, having a good time. Maybe people were wearing masks, crazy costumes. There'd be pumpkin pie with whipped cream, guessing games, maybe a treasure hunt.

Skip was lonely, for the first time in his life. *Lonely.* He badly wanted a Scotch, but he decided to keep his oath to himself, and having decided this, asked himself why. He put his hands flat

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down on his desser top and gazed at his own face in the mirror. He saw creases running from the flanges of his nose down beside his mouth, wrinkles under his eyes. He tried to smile, and the smile looked phony. He turned away from the mirror.

At that instant a spot of light caught his eye. It was out the window, in the upward sloping field. A procession—so it seemed, maybe eight or ten figures—was walking up his field with flashlights or torches or both. Skip opened the window slightly. He was rigid with rage, and fear. They were on his land! They had no right! And they were kids, he realized. Even in the darkness he could see by the procession's own torches that the figures were a lot shorter than adults' figures would be.

Skip whirled, ready to shout for Andy, and at once decided that he had better not. He ran downstairs and grabbed his own powerful flashlight. He didn't bother grabbing his jacket from a hook, though the night was crisp.

"Hey!" Skip yelled, when he had run several yards into the field. "Get off my property! What're you *doing* walking up there!"

The kids were singing some crazy, high-pitched song, nobody singing on key. It was just a wild treble chant. Skip recognized the word "scarecrow."

"We're going to burn the scarecrow . . ." something like that.

"Hey, there! Off my land!" Skip fell, banged a knee, and scrambled up again. The kids had heard him, Skip was pretty sure, but they weren't stopping. Never before had anyone disobeyed Skip—except of course Maggie. *"Off my land!"*

The kids moved on like a black caterpillar with an orange headlight and a couple of other lights in its body. Certainly the last couple of kids had heard Skip, because he had seen them turn, then run to catch up with the others. Skip stopped running. The caterpillar was closer to the scarecrow than he was, and he was not going to be able to get there first.

Even as he thought this, a whoop went out. A scream! Another scream of mingled terror and delight shattered their chant. Hysteria broke out. What surely was a little girl's throat gave a cry as shrill as a dog whistle. Their hands must have touched the corpse, maybe touched bone, Skip thought.

Skip made his way back toward his own house, his flashlight pointed at the ground. It was worse than the police, somehow. Every kid was going to tell his parents what he had found. Skip knew he had come to the end. He had seen businessmen, seen a

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lot of men come to the end. He had known men who had jumped out of windows, who had taken overdoses.

Skip went at once to his rifle. It was in the living room downstairs. He put the muzzle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

When the kids streaked down the field, heading for the road a few seconds later, Skip was dead. The kids had heard the shot, and thought someone was trying to shoot at them.

Andy heard the shot too. He had been watching TV in his room. A minute before, the glow of torches from the string of kids going up the field had caught his eye, as he had been sitting near the window, but he had thought no more of the kids. They were just having fun, wandering around with torches on Halloween.

On hearing the shot, Andy's first thought was that Skipperton might have been firing in the air to celebrate Halloween, or maybe to scare the kids off his land—you never knew about Skipperton. Then Andy wondered, could Skipperton have had an accident—cleaning his gun, something like that?

So Andy switched off his set and went over to Skipperton's house. No answer when he knocked, so he knocked again and called, "Mr. Skipperton?"

Then Andy fished his keys from his pocket and opened the back door. There was silence in the house, and a faint smell of gunsmoke. He found Skipperton on the living-room floor, blood coming from his mouth and the top of his head blown off.

Suddenly Andy realized. Skipperton had seen the kids going up to the scarecrow, and he had thought the kids would discover old Frosby's body. Sure, that must've been it! So Skipperton had killed himself, thinking—maybe thinking his life would be ruined, finished, if he was convicted of murder.

"Gosh, Mr. Skipperton—" Andy murmured, wordless after that, stricken with shock, even sorrow. Andy had liked old Skip. He had also wanted to keep his job here, so Andy had removed that corpse days ago and buried it so the police would *never* find it. If Mr. Skipperton had only known that!

"Q"

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a NEW Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

This newest detective adventure of Rand, the Double-C man, head of the Department of Concealed Communications, had its origin—more accurately, its inspiration—in the first Crime Writers International Congress, held in London October 5-8, 1975. No less than 246 mystery writers attended this first international convention of crime-detective-and-suspense authors—96 from the United Kingdom, 108 from the United States, and delegates from Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Plans are now afoot to hold a second Crime Writers International Congress in April 1978, in New York City.

Now, suppose Rand had attended the 1975 conference as one of its Guest Speakers, and suppose . . .

THE SPY AT THE CRIME WRITERS CONGRESS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

They'd held the retirement party for Jeffery Rand on the previous Friday night, but he was still around the office four days later, clearing out a decade's accumulation of trifles and trinkets from his desk at Double-C. Though he was not yet 50, a number of factors had converged in recent months to convince him that retirement from British Intelligence was the proper course for him to follow.

For one thing, there was his forthcoming marriage to Leila Gaad, who'd shared his adventures in Egypt before moving to England to be near him. The wedding date was only a month away, and Leila deserved a husband who wouldn't be up half of the

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night trying to crack an intercepted cipher, or worse yet, programing a computer to crack it.

Then, too, there'd been the death of Taz. His Russian archrival had come out of retirement to handle one more Kremlin assignment—only to meet a grisly death on a street in Switzerland. Rand didn't want to end up that way.

So he was going off with Leila and leaving the Department of Concealed Communications in the hands of Parkinson and the others—men more skilled than himself in the new technology of codebreaking. Only one assignment remained for that afternoon, something wished on him by Hastings in the month prior to his retirement.

"You're retiring, Rand. You're the perfect one for it," Hastings had insisted.

Rand was dubious. "Talk to a roomful of crime writers about ciphers?"

"That's what they want. They're having an International Congress for three days at the Piccadilly Hotel, and they asked to hear a talk on codes and ciphers. They've already lined up Scotland Yard men, locksmiths, crime reporters, and firearms experts, in addition to a good many authors."

"I'm no speaker," Rand insisted.

"That's no problem. Your segment of the program will be chaired by Chancy O'Higgins, the mystery writer and television host. If you should falter he'll get you going with the proper questions."

Along with most other Britons, Rand had watched O'Higgins on Weekend television, seated with an hourglass and a flickering candle while he spun ghost stories, interviewed witches, and created an eerie atmosphere that was uniquely his own. The prospect of sharing the program with O'Higgins persuaded Rand to accept.

And so on this Tuesday afternoon in early October, Rand journeyed up to the Piccadilly Hotel. He remembered with some amusement Leila's comment when he'd told her about it. "A good thing! You'll meet some publishers and they'll ask you to do a book about your experiences. We must live on something after you retire."

Oddly enough, the first person he met in the hotel lobby turned out to be a publisher. Rand approached him when he saw the silver sheriff's badge that identified him as a member of the Or-

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ganizing Committee. "Pardon me, are you with the Crime Writers?"

"I certainly am. Don't have my name tag on, but I'm George Bellows. I do some writing, but mainly I'm with Bellows Brothers, the publisher."

"Jeffery Rand. I'm one of the afternoon's speakers."

"Rand of Double-C! Of course we've all heard of you. Anxious to hear your talk. Come along—this way." He led Rand to the elevator, pausing on the way to introduce him to Edgar Wallace's daughter, Penelope Wallace, the Congress Director. "She's done a fine job," Bellows said when they had squeezed in among the others on the elevator. "And so has Jean Bowden, our Chairman. Jean was out to Heathrow Saturday morning to meet the American delegation. The opening sessions have gone very well."

"Are many here from America?"

"Over a hundred. They're the ones with white name tags. The British and Canadians have red tags, the Scandinavians yellow—you'll see a great many of those—and the other Europeans are blue."

Rand turned to a white-haired woman crowded into his corner of the elevator. "You must be American," he said, glancing at her name tag. The name on it was Gretta Frazer.

"That I am, from Chicago and Washington. I write paperback Gothics. It may not be literature, but it's fun and it pays the bills." The elevator jolted to a stop and they found themselves deposited in a reception area adjoining the conference rooms. A bar ran along one wall and many of the delegates had a drink in hand. "I hope we can chat more later," Gretta Frazer said before she was swept away by a couple of friends.

"That's Pat McGerr," Bellows said, "another writer from Washington. And the fellow with the black beard is H. R. F. Keating. Perhaps you've read some of his books."

Bellows steered him expertly through the crowd, aiming toward a large familiar figure who was the center of attention near the bar. He recognized Chancy O'Higgins at once from his weekly appearances on the television screen. He was not quite so fat as he appeared on camera, but he'd still be hard to miss. His sandy hair flew off in all directions like some latter-day Dylan Thomas, and his jacket didn't quite come together across his bulging abdomen.

"Rand!" he thundered in his familiar television voice. "I was just telling Michael Gilbert I hope we can start the session promptly at two. The publishers sponsored a cruise on the Thames

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this morning and people are just getting back from it. But I think we'll have enough to begin. Anyway, it's good to meet you. I think we'll have a lively session."

Rand followed him into a large meeting room, past rows of chairs to the speaker's table. Already placed on it were the twin props from the O'Higgins television show, the hourglass and the candle. The bulky author eyed his watch until the hands showed exactly two o'clock, then he upturned the hourglass so that the sand would start its descent. "Come on, everyone!" he boomed out. "Take your seats, please."

He lit the candle, as he did at the beginning of each TV show, and opened with a glowing recitation of Rand's accomplishments during his years with Double-C. Rand saw the American woman, Gretta Frazer, slip in and take a seat next to Penelope Wallace. George Bellows was down front in the first row.

O'Higgins concluded his opening by turning to Rand. "Now then, Mr. Rand, what can you tell an assembly of crime writers about codes and ciphers that we don't already know?"

Rand stood up, gazing out at the sea of expectant faces. "Thank you for your kind introduction, Mr. O'Higgins. It's indeed a pleasure to meet you and the other crime writers assembled here from all over the world. Your work, of course, is what keeps people interested in my work. In truth, communications today between governments or agents of a government are more likely to be concealed by electronic technology than by the traditional book codes or Vigenere ciphers. I want to go into some of these things in detail—though naturally I won't be telling you anything that hasn't already been hinted at in the public press."

He paused for a sip of water, then continued. "Sometimes communications are concealed merely by the geography of the situation. For example, staff cars and limousines in the Moscow area have long communicated with the Kremlin and each other by radiotelephone. The Americans had a secret spy satellite with an antenna system so highly sophisticated it could listen in on those conversations as the satellite passed slowly over Moscow."

He went on like this a bit longer, then switched to an account of his own experiences, ending with the story of Taz's recent death in Switzerland. A few in the audience headed for the doors then, but most remained for a brief question-and-answer period.

Finally, as the last of the sand trickled through the hourglass, Chancy O'Higgins rose to end the session. Rand glanced at his

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watch and saw that it was exactly three o'clock. "Accurate hourglass you have there."

O'Higgins smiled. "It has to be, for television."

He bent to blow out the candle as the audience streamed toward the doors. At that instant, as if by some bizarre cause-and-effect relationship, a muffled boom shook the building.

George Bellows came instantly alert. "That was a bomb—in the hotel!"

"Damned I.R.A.!" someone else muttered. The bombings of London hotels and restaurants, apparently the work of an Irish Republican Army splinter group, had grown to epidemic proportions that autumn. Barely a week passed without some new outrage and a new list of casualties.

Bellows and some others ran to the stairs, and Rand was left standing with O'Higgins and Gretta Frazer. "It was a fine, interesting talk," she complimented him. "This is my first meeting with a real spy."

"I'm hardly that," Rand protested.

They were still chatting and moving toward the door when George Bellows returned. "Terrible thing!" he told O'Higgins. "It was a bomb, all right, and it killed Tom Wager."

O'Higgins was shocked. "Not Tom!" He turned to Rand. "Did you know him? He was a journalist who turned to writing spy thrillers."

"Afraid I don't read much in the field. But where did the bomb go off?"

"Down in the lobby. Couple of other people were injured. I suppose Tom was on his way up here when it happened."

"I'd better go right down," O'Higgins said. They started for the stairs and Rand trailed along, though he noticed the American woman stayed behind. Perhaps she was squeamish.

When they reached the lobby it was a scene of turmoil. Firemen, police, and Scotland Yard men mingled with doctors and ambulance attendants. The blast seemed to have gone off near the center of the small lobby, leaving a large scorched spot in the carpeting. Every window and glass partition in sight was shattered.

Rand sidestepped a uniformed bobby trying to clear the lobby and found his old friend Inspector Stephens standing with two bomb-squad experts. "Hello, Rand. What are you doing here?"

"Speaking to the Crime Writers International Congress. I'd just finished when we heard the blast."

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"It was one of their chaps who got killed. Fellow named Wager."

"More Irish terrorists?"

Inspector Stephens hesitated. "Probably. Who else sets off bombs in hotel lobbies these days?"

"But you're not sure?"

"Too soon to tell."

Rand could sense that something was wrong. "What's the rub?"

"Bomb wasn't planted in the lobby. It was in the briefcase Wager was carrying."

"You think he was bringing it in to plant it?"

"Doubtful. He must have known all the hotels run spot searches these days. More likely it was planted without his knowledge."

"That makes it premeditated murder," Rand said.

"It's a possibility," Stephens admitted.

Rand had expected to leave the hotel at once, letting Scotland Yard deal with the bombing, but that was not to be. George Bellows caught him at the door and urged him back. "You can do us a great service, Mr. Rand, if you'll talk to Tom Wager's widow."

"That's a bit out of my line. Perhaps a clergyman—"

"She heard you speak upstairs. She won't talk to anyone else."

A bit puzzled, Rand followed the publisher to a room just off the lobby. A tall slim woman, a bit younger than he'd expected, awaited him with dry eyes. "You're Mr. Rand. I'm Joyce Wager, Tom's wife."

"A terrible thing about your husband," he said, taking her hand.

"Tom was fated to die violently. He often said so himself. I've no tears to shed for him."

Rand made no comment.

"But that doesn't mean I intend to let his killer go unpunished. He was a good man, for all his faults."

"I don't see how I fit in," Rand said. "I'm not with the police, and I've just retired from British Intelligence."

"Tom's new book is a factual one—about a writer who worked with the Germans during the war, writing propaganda for them while serving as a correspondent in Switzerland. The truth about the man never came out after the war, and he's had a successful writing career since that time."

"The man's name?"

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"Tom's manuscript, to be published next month, only identifies him by the code name of Lucky."

"He never told you who Lucky was?"

She shook her head. "That's what I want you to find out. I think Tom was killed by this man Lucky. Tom told me he met someone for lunch while I was on the boat ride this morning, and that he was meeting him again in the lobby at five minutes after three."

"Who's publishing the book?" Rand asked, glancing at Bellows.

"Not me, old chap. Red Lion is his publisher."

"Will you help?" Joyce Wager asked Rand.

"I'll ask a few questions. I can't do more than that."

Inspector Stephens entered the room and indicated that Mrs. Wager was needed. When she'd left, Rand said, "The woman's composure astounds me. Her husband hasn't been dead a half hour."

"They were not terribly close," the publisher admitted.

Wager's body had been removed and a crew was busy cleaning up the lobby. Rand and Bellows crossed to the hotel lounge with its shattered windows and found a number of the delegates talking in hushed tones about the tragedy. He was getting quite skilled at reading name tags now, and he identified Michael Gilbert standing with Nigel Morland and Josephine Bell. A number of American writers, including Robert L. Fish and Stanley Ellin, were seated at a table close to the door. Hillary Waugh and Franklin Bandy stood nearby, looking serious.

Chancy O'Higgins was holding court at a round center table, his booming voice only slightly softened by the tragedy. He motioned Rand to join them and said, "I've often thought crime writers would make the perfect murderers. What do you say, Rand?"

"Do you think one of the crime writers killed Tom Wager?"

"It's a possibility, isn't it? Just as likely as the I.R.A., heaven knows!"

"You're only saying that because you're Irish," the American woman, Gretta Frazer, said.

"I'm a Scotsman and there's quite a difference," O'Higgins corrected her with a smile. "But really, wouldn't we make the perfect murderers?"

George Bellows joined them with a drink from the bar. "We'd be forever killing our victims with icicles in locked rooms."

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After another round of drinks and some comments by Christianna Brand and Desmond Bagley, Rand excused himself and went outside for a taxi. As he glanced in both directions, a familiar black limousine glided to the curb. "This is an honor," Rand said, climbing into the back seat with Hastings.

"Part of the service for retired personnel. How was your talk?"

"Seemed well-received. Until the bombing, that is."

"Ah, yes. Poor Tom Wager."

Rand smiled. "I gather you have an interest in him."

"We have an interest in a book he's written."

"You know about that?"

"It's no secret. His publisher issued a press release a month ago. We asked to see galley proofs as a matter of routine."

"What do you think?"

Hastings shrugged. "It reads like fiction but it could be fact. If so, it could be dangerous for someone trying to live down his past. The bombing just doesn't feel like an I.R.A. job."

"I'm retired, remember? Where do I fit in?"

Hastings snorted. "You'll never really retire, Rand. This business is in your blood."

"All right, what do you want?"

"If this Lucky—the fellow in the book—did kill him, it was because he feared Wager would start naming names. I want you to go back to tomorrow's sessions and see what you can find out."

The limousine passed Rand's apartment and circled the block. "I can do that," Rand admitted. "But I might not find Lucky. He might be pure fiction, or he might have been Wager himself. Did anyone ever call him Lucky Wager?"

"Not that I know of. But he *was* in Switzerland during the war."

"There's no doubt the dead man is really Wager?"

"His wife identified him."

"Could she have killed him for his book royalties?"

"That's highly unlikely as a murder motive. He'd only received a small advance from his publisher."

This time around the block Rand signaled the driver to stop. "All right," he said, getting out. "I'll be in touch."

Rand took the elevator to his apartment and unlocked the door. It was nearly dark, and only the last of the twilight filtered through his mesh curtains. But when he saw the curtains closed he knew he had a visitor. "Leila?" he called.

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A light by the sofa snapped on, and then he saw her.

It was Gretta Frazer and she was pointing a gun at him.

"Sit down," she said, lowering the weapon. "I won't shoot you."

"Getting in the mood for one of your Gothics?" he asked the American woman.

"Not exactly."

"I thought I left you back at the hotel."

"You did. You must have taken the long way home."

"I was chatting with a friend. What's the gun for?"

"I didn't know how you might react to finding me here. I'm a bit old for a housebreaker."

"What are you, usually?"

The white-haired woman opened her purse and tossed him her wallet. "Inside pocket, under the calendar."

He found an ID card and recognized it at once. "National Security Agency in Washington. I'd like to read one of your Gothics someday."

"The novels are a sideline. I've worked in N.S.A.'s Communications Section for the past twenty years."

"Then my talk this afternoon was nothing new to you."

"I've heard it all before, if not in so public a forum. The information about our spy satellites was especially distressing."

"It's all been in print."

"Nevertheless, we don't like that sort of information turning up in every other spy novel."

Rand smiled. "I understand N.S.A. is even more computerized than we are. Is it true you have a machine programed to read every cablegram sent to or from the country, and to print out any messages containing key words like 'oil' or 'Mideast' or 'Russia'?"

"We have something like that," she conceded. "I'll give you a tour next time you're in Washington."

"What do you want of me now?"

"I came to talk about Tom Wager's death."

"It seems to be a popular subject today."

"His book is popular at N.S.A. I drew the assignment of coming here because my writing gives me a perfect cover at an International Convention like this. My mission was to contact Wager and offer him money to reveal the identity of Lucky."

Rand nodded thoughtfully. "You may have supplied the motive I've been searching for. If Wager went to Lucky and demanded

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more money than you offered, it could have got him killed."

"We think that's what happened, and that's why I'm here. We need someone familiar with operations during the Second World War, and I understand you were in intelligence work back then."

"As a *very* young man," Rand assured her. "But I'll do what I can for you." *And* for Hastings, *and* for Joyce Wager, he added silently. He'd never been so much in demand when he was head of Double-C.

He just wondered how he was going to satisfy any one of them, let alone all.

Rand spent much of Wednesday morning at his old office, looking through microfilmed records of the war years. Tom Wager certainly had been a correspondent in Switzerland for a time, but there was no hint he'd committed any of the acts he had ascribed to Lucky. Working from a list of delegates to the Crime Writers International Congress, Rand attempted to pin down any sort of trail leading back to the war years.

But there was nothing.

The closest he came was a cross-indexed note on publisher George Bellows, who'd served as a P.O.W. interrogator for Army Intelligence. There was nothing on Chancy O'Higgins. When he struck out with the other names as well, he began to wonder about different nationalities—but he decided the task was fruitless. He had no real evidence that the mysterious Lucky was a crime writer.

A little before noon he went back to the hotel.

The first person he saw in the lobby was an American novelist, Richard Martin Stern, who directed him to a downstairs meeting room where a panel discussion on mystery writing was about to begin. Stern himself was on the panel, along with Eric Ambler, Gavin Lyall, and Stanley Ellin. Rand stood near the back of the room, listening to the introductory remarks offered by moderator Dick Francis, then walked over to where Gretta Frazer was standing. "Hello," she greeted him. "I understand we missed a very good demonstration by the Police Dog Squad yesterday afternoon. The dogs sniffed out hidden drugs."

"Dogs that could sniff out explosives would be more to the point."

"The police have those too."

Chancy O'Higgins appeared, along with Mrs. Wager, and Rand

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drifted over to catch their conversation. "I can't put you on the show to talk about spies and your husband's murder," the wild-haired writer was saying, "much as I'd like to. I tell ghost stories. The public—my public—doesn't want reality. There are enough talk shows on the BBC for that."

Joyce Wager turned to Rand for help. "Can't you convince him? I need all the help and publicity I can get to bring Tom's killer to justice."

"We're all doing the best we can," Rand assured her.

When she walked away to join a group of Swedish writers, O'Higgins muttered, "Damn woman's trying to promote his book on my show."

They listened to the rest of the discussion, and when it broke up the writers scattered about the room in small groups, chatting informally while photographers snapped pictures. Rand watched Gretta Frazer deep in conversation with Ruth Rendell and Celia Fremlin. Then, as she moved away toward the door, a uniformed bellman appeared. He was paging someone, and Gretta Frazer motioned to him. He handed her an envelope and moved on.

". . . and I did line up a few people for my show," O'Higgins was saying. "C. P. Snow was here for our opening dinner Sunday night, and Kingsley Amis was on the boat ride yesterday. Both of them have written mysteries, you know, and I thought—"

Gretta Frazer tore open the flap of the envelope.

There was a flash and roar of an explosion.

Rand leaped forward, but it was too late.

Inspector Stephens was unhappy. "Letter bomb," he told Rand. "A favorite terrorist weapon, though fortunately one that isn't used too often. A flat piece of plastic explosive with a detonator that went off when the envelope was opened."

"How many injuries in all?"

"Gretta Frazer was killed almost instantly, and three people near her were taken to the hospital. A few others have minor cuts. We're lucky there weren't more."

"Gretta Frazer wasn't lucky," Rand said. "Have you traced the letter?"

"It was left at the desk upstairs, with a note to deliver it down here after the discussion. The clerk didn't see who left it." Stephens shook his head. "I can't see any reason for singling out this American woman."

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"There may have been a reason," Rand confided. "She worked for N.S.A. in Washington. She was sent here to buy information from Tom Wager."

"So the same killer disposed of them both?"

"Looks like it. He may not have been sure how much Wager told her before he died."

Rand left Stephens and moved among the others, aware of the shock etched deep on their faces. Though they wrote about murder, this was the closest most of them had ever been to one. He spotted O'Higgins talking with the American writer William P McGivern, and when they separated Rand cornered the Scotsman and asked, "Are you staying here at the hotel?"

The stout man nodded. "I live in Cambridge and each night after the TV show I enjoy a late drink with fellow writers who live more than an hour's train journey away. I'm here till tomorrow."

"I'd like to talk to you about these killings. Could I come up to your room?"

"Certainly, old man. Room 334. I'll be there in half an hour." He glanced around at the others. "The closing dinner tonight will be more like a wake, I'm afraid. And the press isn't helping any. They seem to think mystery writers can solve crimes as well as write about them."

Rand found Joyce Wager trying to comfort some of the dead woman's American friends. Once more he was amazed at her calm in a crisis. When she was alone he asked her, "Was your husband ever called Lucky?"

"You mean like in his book? Certainly not, Mr. Rand. Tom wasn't writing about himself."

"But he was in Switzerland at the time he described."

"So was Lucky. That was how Tom learned about him."

"Why would he wait thirty years to tell about it?"

"I have no idea." She stared at the knot of policemen clustered around the spot where Gretta Frazer had died. "Do you know who did it yet? Who killed Tom and that woman?"

"I think I do," Rand told her. "Even if I have no evidence, I can't risk waiting for another bomb and another death."

Chancy O'Higgins greeted him at the door and showed him to an overstuffed chair, adjusting the cushion as Rand sat down. His ubiquitous hourglass and candle stood on the low coffee table be

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tween them, though the candle was unlit.

O'Higgins turned over the hourglass as he sat down opposite Rand. "Have to keep track of the time. In an hour I must start dressing for tonight's dinner."

"I heard there was some talk of canceling it."

"Just talk. If the bombs are the work of the I.R.A. we can't buckle under that easily. We went through the blitz, after all, so I guess we can survive a few bombs."

"The bombs aren't the work of the I.R.A.," Rand said. "They're the work of this man named Lucky, a ghost from thirty years ago."

Chancy O'Higgins frowned. "Have you discovered who he is?"

"I think it's you, O'Higgins. I think you killed Tom Wager and Gretta Frazer."

"Oh, come now!"

"His wife is certain Lucky exists."

"His wife! Have you considered the possibility that *she* killed him?"

"I'm sure she'd have put on a more grief-stricken act if she were the murderer. And she'd have had no motive for killing Gretta Frazer, who'd hardly be interested in the Wagers' marital problems. No, I'm betting on you, O'Higgins."

The stout man remained calm, tapping the tips of his fingers together. "Even if Joyce Wager didn't kill her husband, she might have lied about the identity of the dead man. Wager could still be alive, and behind the whole thing himself."

"I considered that too, but it doesn't hold up. The bomb went off in the lobby of a hotel where scores of people who knew Wager were attending a convention. Anyone might have caught a glimpse of him just before the explosion. Anyone might have said, 'No, the dead man isn't Tom Wager.' Hardly the sort of risk a clever murderer would take. The victim had to be Wager, and it's highly unlikely his wife was involved. After all, wives can find far less risky ways to kill their husbands."

O'Higgins was still frowning. "So we're back to me as Lucky—correct?"

"Correct. You see, Wager was supposed to meet his killer in the lobby at 3:05. The meeting was necessarily in the lobby to make certain Wager didn't wander into the session where I was talking and endanger so many people—or if he did enter the session room, that he'd leave before the bomb went off. It also had to be in the

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lobby because you hoped the explosion would be blamed on the I.R.A. Now I asked myself, why was the time set at 3:05 instead of three o'clock? Since the killer didn't intend to keep his appointment anyway, what difference could five minutes make?

"But if Wager knew Lucky had to be somewhere else until three, the odd timing is explained. Where did Lucky have to be? At my talk, of course. But not as a spectator, because any of them could have left early. Only one person besides myself *had* to stay until three o'clock, and that was you. To convince Wager you really meant to meet him, you had to set the time for a few minutes *after* three."

"What sort of proof is that?" O'Higgins scoffed. "If Wager was meeting me, he would have come upstairs where he knew I was."

"I'm sure you persuaded him against it. According to his wife he'd already had a luncheon meeting with Lucky—when I suppose you managed to hide the bomb in his briefcase—and the later meeting could only have been arranged so you'd pay him the money he demanded. You could easily have convinced him that the money shouldn't be passed upstairs, in view of hundreds of delegates who knew you both. You no doubt suggested meeting in the lobby and then strolling up Piccadilly."

"Anything else?"

"Oh, yes. Wager's book exposed a man he named Lucky. Your name, Chancy, is the Scottish word for Lucky, isn't it?"

Chancy O'Higgins was still smiling, but now—in a movement too fast for Rand to follow—his right hand held a small Beretta automatic. "Keep talking, Rand. You have until the sand runs through this hourglass, and then you will die."

"Oh?"

"You are seated on the last of my little infernal machines. When I adjusted the cushion for you, I tripped the timer so it would explode in one hour. Watch the sand. It is your life draining away."

Rand shifted uneasily. He was certain the man was serious. "Do you intend to remain here until it explodes?"

"Of course. My bombs are carefully made. It will destroy you and the chair. I will shield my face and body and suffer a few minor burns at worst. Just enough to place me above suspicion."

The sand was already a quarter of the way through the glass. "Why don't you light your candle too," Rand suggested, "and really set the scene?"

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O'Higgins flicked a lighter with his left hand and leaned over to touch the wick. "I'll do just that. It pleases me that you're not afraid to die."

"Forty-five minutes is a long time."

"No one will rescue you, if that's what you're thinking. I used the hour timer to give you a chance for your life. If you hadn't accused me you could have walked out of here alive without ever knowing about the bomb in the chair."

Rand reached out and pushed the candle close to the hourglass.

"Don't touch that! Another movement and I'll shoot you! The bomb will easily hide the traces of a bullet wound."

"Sorry. I just wanted a little more light on my life slipping away. While we're waiting you can tell me about Gretta Frazer. I understand that you killed Wager to silence him, but why did you kill the American woman?"

"Because Wager told me of her money offer, and I couldn't be sure I'd killed him before he talked. When she left the lounge immediately after you yesterday, I followed her to your apartment. I knew you were both after me then, and I couldn't risk leaving her alive. The letter bomb was carefully made to kill only her."

The sand was now halfway through the hourglass, and Rand imagined he could feel the outline of the bomb under his cushion. "Well—thirty minutes to live, more or less. What shall we talk about? Your years in Switzerland?"

O'Higgins sighed. "I was a young man then, too young for the assignment, I suppose. Reporting the war from a neutral country like Switzerland was a bore at best. I fell in with some people from the German Embassy and it was the first excitement I'd had. I imagined writing a book about it later, but of course I never did. Tom Wager wrote the book."

"He waited thirty years."

"He waited until I was a successful author and television personality. Then he came to me for money. When I refused him, he threatened me with the book. My only mistake was in not killing him at once. I waited, and too many people became interested in the book—people like you and Gretta Frazer."

He fell silent for a moment, and Rand focused his eyes on the hourglass. Only a quarter of the sand remained in the upper part now. He watched the candle flame flickering next to it and asked, "But why use bombs? Why injure innocent people?"

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"The Germans got me interested in explosives and bombmaking while I was writing propaganda for them. Later I kept it up, as a hobby. On weekends I'd go off to the fields outside Cambridge and set off little bombs. If I say so myself, I'm now quite an expert on the technique. I've never had a bomb that failed."

"If I die you'll never get away with it, O'Higgins. Too many people know what I'm working on."

Chancy O'Higgins shook his head. "Nobody knows. People in your line of work are secretive."

Rand's eyes were on the sand. "You can't kill me like this!"

"You're retired, Rand. Your life is over anyway."

"At forty-nine?"

"It's you or me." He raised the pistol an inch. "Don't move and don't try kicking the table."

They sat in silence, facing each other, as the last of the sand trickled away. Still holding the gun steady, the stout man rose and stepped behind his chair, shielding his lower face with an upturned arm.

Rand watched the sand.

Just a few grains more, and then—

The sand was finished. The hour was up.

Nothing happened.

"Your bomb is a bit late," Rand remarked.

"It *couldn't* be late! That timer is foolproof!" He glanced at his watch but that did him no good, since he hadn't checked it at the beginning of the hour.

They waited another minute. Rand could feel the sweat running down his back.

Nothing happened.

"It's not going to explode," Rand said. "It's a dud."

O'Higgins motioned with his gun. "Get out of the chair and stand facing the wall! No tricks!"

Rand did as he was told and the stout man moved forward, clawing at the cushion with his left hand.

That was when the bomb went off.

Hastings found Rand in the emergency ward at the hospital, having some lacerations on his back treated by a young nurse. "Wait till Leila hears of this!"

Rand smiled through a lip he'd cut when his face hit the wall. "I hope you won't tell her. Is O'Higgins dead?"

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Hastings nodded. "Dead on arrival. So he was our bomber?"

"*And* the mysterious Lucky. I'll tell you all about it."

"Stephens already told me you were sitting on a bomb. How'd you turn the tables?"

"He was timing it with his hourglass. When it didn't go off on schedule he had to have a look. Said he'd never had one fail. But I'd gotten him to light his damned candle, and I shoved it up right next to the glass. Among Sixteenth Century seamen it was called 'warming the glass.' In order to shorten their watch they put the hourglass near a lantern or lamp. The glass expanded from the heat and the sand ran through faster. It was a flogging offense on most ships."

"So the hour wasn't really up when O'Higgins thought it was."

"Luckily for me! I didn't really know if my hourglass stunt would work, but it was the only chance I could think of."

"He should have known better than to go examining an unexploded bomb."

"He had too much pride. He couldn't believe it when it didn't explode on schedule."

"By God, Rand, you can't retire! What will we do without you?"

Rand turned over as the nurse finished dressing his wounds. "You'll get by. There'll be others a good deal better than me."

"I'm betting you'll be back within six months," Hastings said.

Rand remembered what had happened to the Russian, Taz, when he came out of retirement. That had been a bomb too, only Taz hadn't been as lucky as Rand.

"No," he told Hastings, "don't bet on it."

EDITORIAL NOTE: No, you *can* bet on it. Rand will be back!

"Q"

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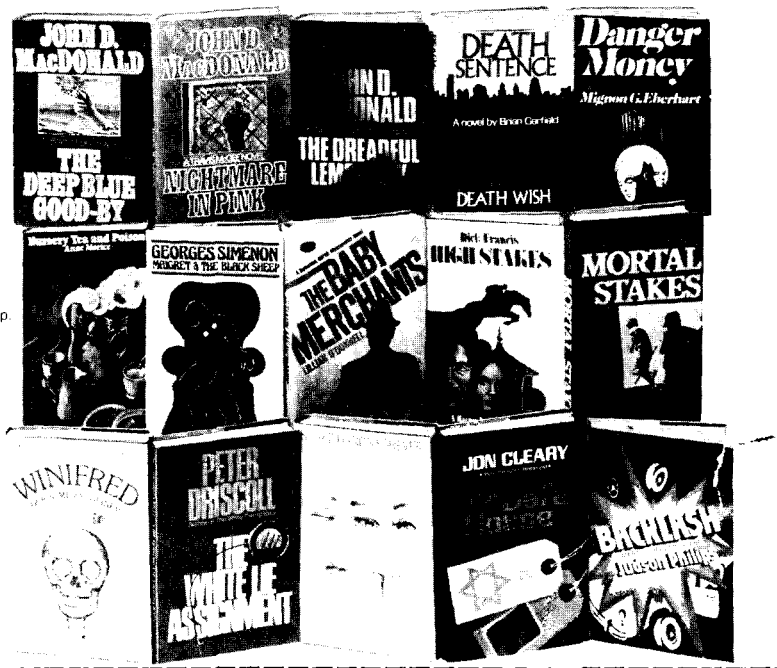

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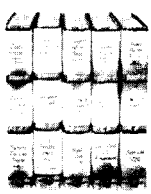

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